

# **Crisis? What crisis?!**

Discourses on the economic crisis in two Dutch municipalities

Mark van Dam





Faculteit Politieke en Sociale Wetenschappen

Abraham van Dam

## ***Crisis? What crisis?!***

*Discourses on the economic crisis in two Dutch municipalities*

Proefschrift voorgedragen tot het behalen van de graad van  
Doctor in de Politieke Wetenschappen

2017

Promotor	Prof. dr. Herwig Reynaert Vakgroep Politieke Wetenschappen
Copromotor	Prof. dr. Stefaan Slembrouck Vakgroep Taalkunde
Decaan	Prof. dr. Herwig Reynaert
Rector	Prof. dr. Anne De Paepe

## Table of contents

1	Crisis? What crisis? .....	7
1.1	The central question of this research .....	7
1.2	The economic crisis .....	9
1.3	Socially constructed reality .....	12
1.4	The role of language.....	16
1.5	Power .....	19
1.6	The economic crisis as discourse .....	23
2	What the bleep do we know!?.....	27
2.1	Contingency .....	27
2.2	Relativism?.....	33
2.3	The nature and audience of this academic text.....	35
2.4	The role of the researcher .....	37
2.5	Knowledge is power? .....	45
3	Look who's talking.....	49
3.1	Discourse analysis .....	49
3.2	The structure-agency issue .....	59
4	Two tales of a city.....	71
4.1	Analytic bracketing .....	71
4.2	The selection of Highwater and Dryland .....	77
4.3	Methods used in my empirical research.....	83
4.4	My role as a researcher.....	92
5	The Task Force of Highwater .....	97
5.1	The Task Force of Highwater from a structure perspective .....	97
5.2	The Task Force of Highwater from an agency perspective.....	112
5.3	Findings of power through structure and agency in Highwater.....	133
6	The Leading Group in Dryland.....	139
6.1	The Leading Group in Dryland from a structure perspective .....	139
6.2	The Leading Group in Dryland from an agency perspective .....	158
6.3	Findings of power through structure and agency in Dryland .....	178
7	What's the story? .....	183
7.1	Crisis? What crisis?! A theoretical answer .....	183
7.2	Crisis? What crisis?! An empirical answer .....	185
7.3	Contribution to the practice discourse on a micro level.....	191
7.4	Contribution to the practice discourse on a macro level.....	193
7.5	Contribution to the academic discourse .....	194
7.6	Contribution to my personal development as researcher and human being.....	196

7.7	Suggestions for future research .....	197
7.8	The continuing story... ..	198
	Literature .....	201
	Summary.....	209
	Samenvatting .....	215
	Dankwoord.....	221

## **1 Crisis? What crisis?**

This book is about a research into the phenomenon of the economic crisis that started in 2008. The empirical part of this study, which I did in two municipalities, is described in chapters 5 and 6 of this book. But before I come to the description of this empirical study I describe in the first four chapters the context within which this research should be placed. I start this chapter with an exploration of the phenomenon on which this research is based: the economic crisis. Why did I choose this economic crisis as the topic of my research? What 'is' the economic crisis anyway? And how do I look at the economic crisis in this research? These are questions that are covered in this first chapter: questions about the ontology of this research. In this description of my research I regularly reflect on my own role as a researcher. This has to do with the context in which my research is done. This book is written in the 'I' form, because it is a personal description of the research I have done.

### ***1.1 The central question of this research***

The central question of this research is: "How do municipalities with their partners make sense of the economic crisis?". This question is a central theme throughout this book. It is the question my research is supposed to answer. But this was not the question I had in mind at the beginning of my research. Like every academic research, my research has also been a quest. When I started my research, I was not sure what I wanted to study and how I wanted to do this. During the research, I found my way and only in the final phase I could define the central question as mentioned above.

In fact, this applies for my entire research. The research process was not as organized and structured as it may appear in this book. It was a search in which I gradually came to the research results that I describe here. In this book I have tried to show something of this quest by describing transparently how I came to certain choices or how certain phases of the research evolved. For me this book is not only meant to describe the results of my research, but also a description of the research process. At the same time, I also tried to write this book as clearly and comprehensibly as possible. The reader should be able to easily follow the story that I describe. Consistency of the entire research has been a guiding principle for me. As I will explain in section 2.5, I tried to perform my research in a consistent manner.

Therefore I do start with my central question: "How do municipalities with their partners make sense of the economic crisis?". This question consists of three elements.

First of all this research is about 'the economic crisis'. By this I mean the economic crisis that began in a large part of the (western) world in 2008. This was in the early days of my research and I decided to use this economic crisis as the subject of my research. In the next section I will explain this choice and the way I have defined the economic crisis in my research.

Second, my research is about 'municipalities and their partners'. In my research of the economic crisis I specifically look from the perspective of two municipalities. This has everything to do with my professional background as a management consultant at a consultancy firm that is mainly focused on the market of local municipalities. From this background, I had a lot to do with municipalities and I saw the impact that the economic crisis had on them. During my empirical research in the two municipalities, Highwater and Dryland, I broadened my perspective of 'local municipalities' to 'local municipalities and their partners'. I did this because I saw that these two municipalities invited representatives of some of their main partners in the groups that they had formed to respond to the effects of the economic crisis. These were amongst others representatives from schools, banks, health care institutions, the Employee Insurance Agency (in Dutch: UWV) and local entrepreneurs. Together they tried to mitigate the effects of the economic crisis on their local community.

Third, my research is about 'sensemaking'. I have looked how municipalities and their partners made sense of the economic crisis. In my research I was not so much concerned about the concrete measures they took, or the question if they succeeded to mitigate the effects of the economic crisis. I focused on the process of sensemaking. In the next chapters I will explain what I mean by this, but the term discourse plays an important role here. These terms, sensemaking and discourse, have an important place in the ontology, epistemology and methodology of my research.

So my research was about the question: "How do municipalities with their partners make sense of the economic crisis?". It was never my intention to give a conclusive answer to this question in my research. That is not what I aim to do in this book. In this book I give a description of how this process of sensemaking has evolved in two municipalities, Highwater and Dryland. Based on these two municipalities, I cannot formulate any general conclusions about 'municipalities and their partners'. This has everything to do with my view on academic research. My ambition is more modest. I confine myself to these two municipalities. For each of these municipalities I give a thorough description of the process of sensemaking. This helps to explain why people made certain choices and why things evolved the way they did. It does not say whether the people in the municipalities made the 'right' choices, or whether the municipalities dealt with the economic crisis in 'the best way possible'. My description of the sensemaking processes can, however, help to see the causes and consequences of the actions of the municipalities. This explanation is my interpretation, done from a specific framework, which I will describe in the next chapters. This interpretation is primarily focused on these specific municipalities. At the end of this book I will also make a comparison between the two municipalities. I will also describe some common threads, that seem to be relevant in other situations as well. These common threads have a broader relevance than just the two municipalities in my research, but they cannot be seen as general conclusions.



In the remainder of this chapter I will specify some elements of my central question. I do this as clearly and consistently as possible.

## **1.2 *The economic crisis***

My research is about the economic crisis. In this section I describe why I chose this subject and how I have defined the economic crisis.

### **1.2.1 *Personal background and interest***

My PhD research began in the spring of 2008. At that time I had been working for a year at BMC, a consultancy firm for the public sector. I did my PhD research next to my work as a consultant. Although I separated these two different roles, researcher and consultant, certainly there was some kind of mutual influence. When I started my research, I did not yet have a research subject. However, quite soon I decided that I wanted to do my research in municipalities because in my consulting I worked a lot for municipalities. In the first year of my research I read a lot of academic literature, to define my position within the academic field and to construct an academic framework for my research. Soon I became interested in literature on institutional economics and institutional sociology (Barley & Tolbert 1997, Burns & Scapens 2000, Meyer & Rowan 1991, Powell & DiMaggio 1991, Seo & Creed 2002), sensemaking (Weick 1995, Weick et al. 2005, Maitlis 2005, Maitlis & Lawrence 2007, Thomas et al. 1993) and social constructionism (Aardema 2002 and 2005, Berger & Luckmann 1966, Boland et al. 2008, Steen 2005). A central theme in this literature was that the reality in which we live is not objective and fixed, but that it is constructed from social structures. Reality is made by people, who are also at the same time influenced, or even constructed, by the socially constructed reality in which they live. This intrigued me and I wanted to do my research from this starting point.

### **1.2.2 *Current events***

By the end of 2008, the term 'economic crisis' was more and more used in reports on the economic situation in the world, including the Netherlands. I noticed this in the media. But I also noticed it in my consulting work. At BMC, we were discussing what the consequences of the economic crisis on municipalities were or could be. I saw for myself and I heard from colleagues that municipalities were increasingly concerned with this question. But what particularly struck me was the uncertainty that existed around this subject. No one knew exactly what the economic crisis was and what its impact would be. People did not know exactly what the consequences for municipalities were or what municipalities could do about these consequences. Perhaps municipalities could not even do very much. It was a quest. For me this quest seemed like an interesting topic for my research. Partly because it was an issue that concerned municipalities. For me, as a management consultant mainly working for municipalities, this was interesting. But partly also because it was a subject of which I felt it would be interesting to approach from my

theoretical point of view, in which the notions of institutionalism, sensemaking and social constructionism play an important role. Could it be that the quest I saw around the phenomenon of the economic crisis was an example of sensemaking, a search of what the crisis was exactly about? Was this economic crisis not also a constructed reality, the reality of the economic crisis as a social construction? I decided to focus my research on this topic.

After some searching on the internet I saw that in the meantime (it was the spring of 2009) some municipalities had taken concrete measures in response to the economic crisis. They had written documents in which they proclaimed that the economic crisis demanded an active role of municipalities. Municipalities could do something to mitigate the effects of the crisis for their citizens and their local entrepreneurs. Often these municipalities had formed groups that had to show this active role of the municipality. These groups were called project groups or task forces. For my research, I decided to follow some of these groups, to see how they dealt with the economic crisis. I wanted to look how the notions of institutionalism, sensemaking and social constructionism could help to get a better understanding of what was going on in these groups. Gradually I still further sharpened and focused my theoretical framework, as I will describe in the next chapters. But the decision to study some specific municipalities was already made in the spring of 2009, because I wanted to explore the process of social construction more intensively in a limited number of municipalities rather than superficially for municipalities in general. The municipalities I selected were not supposed to be a reflection of all municipalities in the Netherlands. The municipalities I chose were in fact examples of a limited group of municipalities that drew my attention with a very active attitude in relation to the economic crisis. My research was intended to describe the role that the economic crisis and social construction played within this group of municipalities based on some of these specific municipalities.

### 1.2.3      *What is the economic crisis?*

My choice for the economic crisis as my research subject was clearly influenced by the question: what *is* this economic crisis actually? As I said, when the economic crisis started, I had been reading literature on institutionalism, sensemaking and social constructionism. I saw in the media a search of politicians and economists, but also municipalities, for what the economic crisis exactly was. In this search I recognized much of what I read in this academic literature. People were looking for the meaning, the 'sense' of the economic crisis. In this process different opinions, different interpretations came together and a certain shared meaning was constructed and became predominant, until new developments evoked new questions and uncertainty. Then the search process continued again.

#### 1.2.3.1.      *The economic crisis on a global scale*

It all started in the end of 2008. Then the media reported for the first time what was then called the 'credit crisis'. It started in the United States, where problems arose around the so-called 'sub-prime' mortgages. Banks turned out to have given excess credits to people who could not be

expected to repay them. Therefore initially people talked about the 'credit crisis'. Because of this crisis some major banks soon got into trouble, and this spread from the US to other parts of the world. Soon people no longer only spoke of a 'credit crisis', but also of a 'banking crisis' and a 'financial crisis' (Mishkin 2011, Phillips & Yu 2011). This change in the way the crisis was described shows the search that was going on late 2008, early 2009. Every description was indeed a different interpretation of the events that were going on in that period: each was an attempt to make sense of what was going on, and in particular of the scope of its effects. Was this crisis only a crisis in credit? Or in a broader perspective, were the banks in 'crisis'? Or was it even broader and did this crisis affect the entire financial sector? Soon people even spoke of a crisis that affected the entire economy: hence the 'economic crisis'. At this stage, a comparison was often made between this economic crisis and 'The Great Depression' of the 1930s (Temin 2010). The crisis that we had ended up in was supposed to be the worst since then. However, some also felt that this analogy was false. Anyway, the different descriptions that were chosen and the variety of interpretations from various angles clearly show that people were looking for a shared meaning. Because if they agreed on the nature, extent and duration of the crisis, perhaps they could also come to a shared strategy on how to act. Indeed, the question of what actions should be taken by whom, or if anything should be done at all, depended strongly on the question of what kind of crisis this exactly was. In the media several experts were asked about their opinions: stock analysts, economists and politicians often appeared in news programs to give their opinion about the crisis and their prospects for the future. In the spring of 2009, the world leaders of the G20 met to discuss the impact of the crisis. Also in national politics the crisis played a major role. In the Netherlands, the government interfered when several large banks were hit by the crisis. The government argued that they could not allow the 'banking system' to collapse, because the banks were 'too big to fail' (Mishkin 2011, 66-67), so they took over the risks of the banks or even nationalized them<sup>1</sup>. Besides this the discussion was whether the government had to tighten regulation or invest more money into the economy. And beyond all this was the ever-present question of how long the crisis would last: one year, two years, ten years? Or was this crisis maybe even a structural change that was going on in the economy that would lead to a permanently lower economic level?

In the following years the search process continued (Lane 2012). At a European level a new description was given to the crisis: due to problems in some member states of the European Union people spoke about the 'euro crisis'. In Europe, the meaning of the crisis was focused on the European currency and the countries that participated in this currency union. Should the richer countries continue to support the poorer countries or should some countries leave the union? And what would be the meaning of this to the other member states and the European Union as a

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/kredietcrisis/inhoud/aanpak-kredietcrisis-nederland-financiele-sector/nationalisering-fortis-abn-amro-en-sns-reaal>

whole? Gradually the question about how much and where the government should invest in the economy was replaced by a reversed question: how and where should the government cut spending?

#### 1.2.3.2. The economic crisis in municipalities

Also at a local level, in municipalities, a similar search process was going on. In 2009 I noticed in my consultancy work at BMC how some municipalities translated the questions that played at an international and national level to their own local level. What did all this mean for them? A first obvious effect for a number of municipalities had been the 'Icesave affair'. Some municipalities had put their money at the Icelandic bank Icesave. When, due to the crisis, this bank went bankrupt a lot of clients, including some Dutch municipalities, lost their money. This led to the debate on whether these municipalities could have seen this coming, whether they should have placed their money at this bank in the first place and whether or not they had taken an excessive and imprudent risk by doing so. This was an example of a direct consequence of the broader development of the crisis. But in some municipalities the question arose whether they should actively do something about the consequences of the crisis for their own citizens and local entrepreneurs. As I mentioned there were a number of municipalities that formulated a strategy about how they should respond to the crisis. Some of these municipalities formed a special group of people to implement this strategy. In many cases this was before the crisis affected the organizations of the municipalities themselves. The change that occurred at a national level, from the question of whether, where and how much they had to invest in the economy to the question whether, where and how much they had to cut back, also occurred in municipalities. But in the spring of 2009, when many of these groups within municipalities were formed, this change had not yet taken place.

For my research I followed two of these groups. I wanted to see how their sensemaking process evolved. How did they give meaning to the events around them? In chapter 4 I describe how I came to a selection of the two groups that I followed. There I also describe how I have performed my research within these groups. But much of it is related to the theoretical framework from which I have done my research.

### ***1.3 Socially constructed reality***

Academic research can start from different ontological positions. Guba & Lincoln (2005) describe four possible positions or 'paradigms'. Positivism is the first position they describe. They describe the ontology of positivism as "Naïve realism" (Guba & Lincoln 2005, 193). There is only one truth and it exists 'out there', independently of our human perception. The purpose is to discover this truth little by little through academic research. Academic research builds on previous research, and helps to solve the question of what reality actually 'is'. Little by little we come closer to solving the puzzle, closer to 'the Truth'.

My research starts from the position that Guba & Lincoln describe as constructivism (2005, 193). This position differs substantially from positivism, which is, in different variations and nuances, often the prevailing view or the mainstream. From a constructivist position, reality is not separated from but closely linked to our human perception. Reality in itself has no meaning, we as people give it meaning. This means that we construct reality by giving meaning to what we see or experience. Truth is not something you can find, simply because there is no isolated Truth 'out there'. Truth is something that we as humans create or construct.

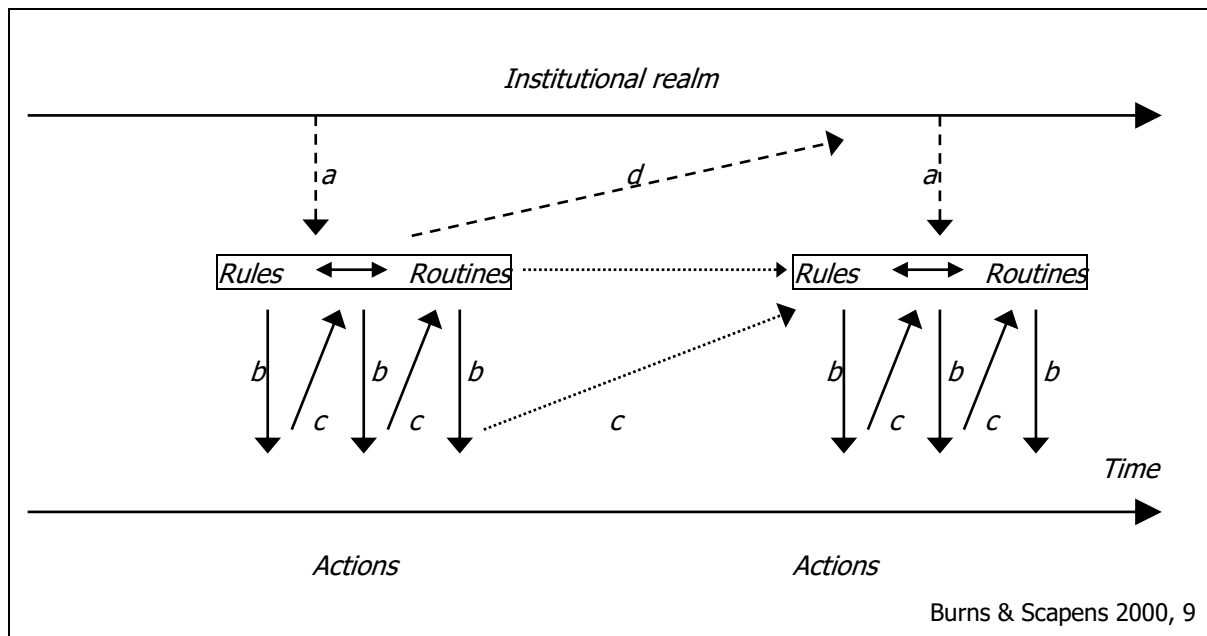
### 1.3.1 Social construction and sensemaking

This view on academic research and in particular the view on reality that underlies it is also expressed in social constructionism, to which I referred earlier. Berger & Luckmann (1966) describe in their book *The social construction of reality* how people make sense of the phenomena around them in interaction with each other. These phenomena are in themselves meaningless, but by talking about them people create a meaning. They give words and names to things. This process is described by Weick (1995) as 'sensemaking'. Whereas Berger & Luckmann are talking about society in general, Weick focuses specifically on organizations. He shows that sensemaking occurs frequently in organizations. In the interaction with each other people in organizations also give meaning to the world around them, in this case specifically the world of the organization. Weick emphasizes that the process of sensemaking does not start from nowhere. Every organization has already existing meanings, which are expressed in the organizational culture, in routines and rules. These existing, shared meanings form a framework in which sensemaking takes place. This framework Weick talks about is according to Berger & Luckmann made of social structures that have been formed by people in the past. When people have given a meaning to a particular phenomenon through social construction or sensemaking, then after some time this meaning will become self-evident for people. One no longer realizes that the meaning is socially constructed. One experiences the meaning as an established fact. Berger & Luckmann call this process the institutionalization of social structures. These institutionalized structures or institutions form the framework within which people give meaning to reality.

### 1.3.2 Institutions

The term 'institutions' is used in a variety of ways by many authors. This term is a central notion in institutional theory, of which there are several variants. Burns & Scapens (2000) and Burns, Ezzamel & Scapens (2003) look from the perspective of old institutional economics to the role of institutions in organizations. They define the concept of institution as "a way of thought or action of some prevalence and permanence, which is embedded in the habits of a group or the customs of a people" (Burns & Scapens 2000, 5-6) or, later in the same article, as "the shared taken-for-granted assumptions which identify categories of human actors and their appropriate activities and relationship" (8). In this definition, the self-evident nature of institutions returns. However, besides

institutions they introduce two concepts that play a role within organizations: rules and routines. These concepts can be positioned between the level of the institutions and the level of concrete actions. Rules are “the formally recognized way in which ‘things should be done’” and routines are “the way in which ‘things are actually done’” (6). They illustrate the connection between the various notions in the figure below.



The arrows indicate a number of important processes. 'a' is the process of encoding. Here the institutional principles are translated into rules and routines within the organization. At 'b', these rules and routines are further translated into concrete actions through the process of enacting. Vice versa at 'c' routines are reproduced through the actions of the people in the organization. This process is called reproduction. Finally, at 'd', the rules and routines are institutionalized again in the process of institutionalization. This figure clearly shows the relationship between institutions and actions and the mutual influence from both. Institutions determine the concrete actions of the people in the organization, but these actions again affect the existing institutions. This is a similar relationship to the one Weick (1995) described between sensemaking and the framework within which sensemaking takes place and the one Berger & Luckmann (1966) described between social structures and institutions. However, there is a difference in perspective and focus. Weick and Berger & Luckmann start at the concrete behavior of individuals and look from that perspective at institutions. Burns & Scapens (2000) and Burns, Ezzamel & Scapens (2003) use as their starting point the institution and look from there at concrete human actions. This relationship between structures or institutions on the one hand and concrete individual behavior on the other, and the different perspectives that can be used to look at this relationship, will be extensively discussed in my research. In section 3.2 I will elaborate on the structure-agency issue, which plays an

important role in my empirical research. There this relationship between human behavior and institutions will be discussed more extensively.

### 1.3.3      *The economic crisis as constructed reality*

In my research I look at the economic crisis as a constructed reality. Earlier I spoke about the search that I saw at the start of the crisis. This was not a search for the objective reality of the crisis 'out there'. It was a search for, and construction of, a shared meaning of what was happening. A meaning that was shared among the group of people to which one belonged. This could be a large group, like the search at an international level in the media, amongst economists and in meetings between world leaders. But it could also be a smaller group, like in the cities where I did my empirical research. The meaning people are looking for should help them to understand, to explain and to deal with the events they are experiencing. People need to live in a world that they can understand and that makes sense to them. Weick (1995) emphasizes that sensemaking occurs predominantly in shock situations, when people are faced with an abundance of information, with complexity or with turbulence (large and/or heavy changes). In these situations, existing meanings are insufficient and new meanings need to be explored. The economic crisis clearly was such a situation, because many things happened which were new for people and to which they did not know how to react. The existing meanings were no longer sufficient to explain what was happening. The start of the economic crisis in late 2008 was a complex situation with a lot of new information about sudden changes. At different levels a new meaning had to be given to this shock situation.

The construction of meaning happens afterwards. Weick (1995) therefore describes sensemaking as retrospective. People give meaning to past experiences. At the time events or experiences take place, people still have to give meaning to them. Afterwards, in retrospect, these experiences or events are constructed into a coherent and meaningful whole. In this process of sensemaking people elaborate the results of previous sensemaking processes. The new events have to get a meaning, fitting in the previous constructed framework of meanings. Therefore, one can say that the process of sensemaking is retrospective on the one hand, but on the other hand it also creates a framework, perspective or horizon for future sensemaking processes. This is also why afterwards history seems like an ordered and consistent whole. The process of sensemaking is so compelling that it seems like this logical ordering was always there, even at the time when the events happened.

Applied to the economic crisis the same process might have been going on. At the start of the crisis itself the accumulation of events was an incoherent whole. In the search that started at different levels, from an international level to the level within municipalities, attempts were made to make a selection of events that one could forge together into a logical and coherent whole.

Other events that did not fit in this coherent whole were excluded from history making. Therefore, afterwards the start of the crisis may seem to be a clear and logical story, while at the time it was not.

In my research I look at this process of sensemaking around the economic crisis. The mutual influence of concrete human behavior and institutions plays also an important role in my research. In describing this process, I also try to find out which events and experiences in the process of sensemaking were not included, in other words, which were not included in the history making of the economic crisis. In the way I do this, the notion of 'language' plays an important role. This role of language in sensemaking I describe in more detail in the next section.

## ***1.4 The role of language***

The figure of Burns & Scapens (2000) that I introduced in the previous section is largely adopted from Barley & Tolbert (1997). The latter developed the figure first, but with one difference. Burns & Scapens describe the level between institutions and actions as 'rules and routines'. These rules and routines are about the organization's desired behavior (rules) and its normal behavior (routines). Barley and Tolbert are not talking about rules and routines, but about 'scripts'. They define scripts as "observable, recurrent activities and patterns of interaction characteristic of a particular setting" (Barley & Tolbert 1997, 98). Although this definition of scripts is not very different from what Burns & Scapens call rules and routines, Barley & Tolbert focus here on an important point. With their use of the term 'script' they emphasize the role of language in the interplay between institutions and concrete behavior. Language plays an important role here, and in my research the concept of language also is a central notion.

### ***1.4.1 Reality is constructed through language***

The 'making' of truth occurs through language. We as humans use language to make sense of the world we live in. Every person has his own vocabulary, with which we can give meaning to the world around us. For everything we see and experience, we search for words. And with these words the world around us acquires meaning. This is how we make our truth. This search for words is not an individual process of independent actors. It happens in interaction and within a context. This is the process of social construction or sensemaking that I described earlier. Every man grows up and is raised within existing vocabularies: those of his parents, friends, teachers, but also those of the media or the culture of his village, city or country. From these vocabularies words are handed to every person to give meaning to their environment. This is the influence of institutions I wrote about earlier, and which I now approach from the perspective of language. From these institutions or shared vocabularies within groups of people, shared truths arise because one uses shared vocabularies to make sense of reality. Also in new, unknown phenomena people



first try to use existing vocabularies to come to new meanings and explanations. Only when the existing vocabularies no longer suffice, people search for new words to adjust their vocabularies and to align them with the current events and experiences.

The importance of language is also recognized by some of the authors cited above. Berger & Luckmann (1966) for example mention the importance of language in the social construction of reality. This process of social construction is a process of interaction between people and this interaction consists mostly of conversations between people. Also Weick (1995) mentions the role of language. A phrase that he uses frequently in the context of sensemaking is: "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" (Weick 1995, 18). Spoken language for Weick apparently precedes the meaning construction inside someone's mind. Sensemaking does not happen in one's mind, but in conversation with others. The role of language, but more specifically applied to organizations, is mentioned in the book *Management and language* of Holman & Thorpe (ed.)(2003). In this book, John Shotter's idea of the manager as 'practical author' plays an important role (see also Cunliffe 2001). Here managers are the 'authors' of their organization's reality. The main instrument of this authorship is conversation. By talking with employees, managers construct reality. This authorship of managers, according to Holman & Thorpe (2003) and Cunliffe (2001), has two functions: first, it helps them to understand what is happening in their organization. Second, managers can also use the tool of conversation to influence the construction of reality by others in the organization.

Hajer & Versteeg (2009) stress the importance of language in policy making. They refer to specific political crises when they say:

*"During those so-called critical moments a struggle takes place regarding the concrete meaning of abstract terms such as integration, immigration, and security. In these situations, the language used not only describes, but also actively creates, social realities, by influencing the way a problem is perceived and then addressed. This creates opportunities for change: the same question formulated using different language will probably yield different preferences."*

Hajer & Versteeg 2009, 6-7

Language, according to Hajer & Versteeg, is not a neutral medium to transfer meanings, but it is actually used to construct these meanings. Language therefore also plays an important role in changes in policies. Or, as Hajer says: "Language has the capacity to make politics, to create signs and symbols that can shift power-balances and that can impact on institutions and policy-making" (Hajer 2006, 67).

#### 1.4.2     Discourse

These authors are no exceptions with the importance they attach to the concept of language. In a broader sense, over the last decades in academics something happened that is called the 'linguistic turn' (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000, 1126, Holstein and Gubrium 2005, 483). This linguistic turn stems from the fact that more and more (social) scientists recognize the importance of language for the study of human behavior. An important person for this linguistic turn is Michel Foucault (Foucault 1989, 1994, 2001, 2002 and 2004). This French philosopher uses the term 'discourse' to describe the role of language in the process of sensemaking. In chapter 3 I will elaborate on the meaning of discourse and the role it plays in my research, but in short a discourse is a set of linguistic expressions about a particular topic, that gives meaning to this particular topic. Foucault for example wrote about the discourse on madness (Foucault 2001), the discourse on the medical world, specifically 'the clinic' (Foucault 1994), the discourse on the human sciences (Foucault 2002) and the discourse on the judiciary, or the 'prison' (Foucault 1989). Foucault had a strong preference for history and used an archaeological or genealogical method. This means that he was primarily concerned with the origin and development of discourses. He analyzed how different discourses influenced each other and how new discourses arose from there.

Foucault's concept of discourse, from the perspective of language, has strong similarities with what I described earlier about social constructs, sensemaking and institutions. Phillips et al. (2004) for example, explicitly connect sensemaking to discourse. According to them, if one wants to study sensemaking and institutions in an organization, one must try to trace texts and discourses. They define discourse as "a system of statements which constructs an object" (Phillips et al. 2004, 636). A discourse "'rules in' certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write or conduct oneself" and "'rules out', limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting oneself in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it" (Phillips et al. 2004, 636). Discourses consist of collections of texts. Texts are more than just written documents: spoken words for example can also be texts. A text can be defined as "any kind of symbolic expression requiring a physical medium and permitting of permanent storage" (636). Texts should be accessible to others, by being pronounced, written or portrayed in one way or another. Texts can have different forms, like written documents, oral reports, art, spoken words, images, symbols, buildings and other expressions. Texts, and also discourses, are thus not only verbal. Terms like 'language' and 'vocabulary' may give this impression, but the explanation Phillips et al. give to the notion of 'text' shows that also 'non-verbal' elements can function as texts and be part of a discourse.

## **1.5 Power**

If reality is socially constructed instead of discovered, then this means that the process by which construction occurs has a major impact on the way we look at reality. In other words, in the process of social construction, sensemaking, institutionalization and discourses, power plays an important role. In literature this notion of power is described in a variety of ways. First I discuss the literature on the concept of 'sensegiving', then I move on to Foucault's view on power in relation to the concept of 'discourse'.

### 1.5.1 Sensegiving and authorship

In the literature on sensemaking, the role of power comes forward in the notion of sensegiving (Maitlis 2005 Maitlis & Lawrence 2007). Sensemaking is defined here as:

*"the process of social construction [...] in which individuals attempt to interpret and explain sets of cues from their environment"*

Maitlis 2005, 21

Sensemaking is an activity of individuals who create their own reality. Although this happens in interaction, it is about *social* construction, individuals who 'make sense' are the subjects in this definition. Sensegiving is defined as:

*"[the] process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality"*

Maitlis & Lawrence 2007, 57

In sensegiving a certain distinction is made between the persons involved. On the one hand, there are the people involved in the process of sensemaking, who are constructing a meaning for certain phenomena. This group can be called the 'sensemakers'. On the other hand, there are also people who already passed through this process of sensemaking. They already have constructed a meaning and now try to move persons in the former group toward the same meaning. This second group is involved in the process of sensegiving and therefore can be called the group of the 'sensegivers'. In this definition, sensegivers try to influence sensemakers. According to Maitlis (2005) and Maitlis & Lawrence (2007), sensegivers are often the leaders in an organization. They are the ones that try to influence the process of sensemaking of their employees or stakeholders. The power lies with these leaders as sensegivers. Sensegiving leaders are able to exercise power over their employees or stakeholders, as they influence their construction of reality. Much depends here on the "discursive ability" of these leaders, or "their ability to construct and articulate persuasive accounts of the world" (Maitlis & Lawrence 2007, 80). The power of these sensegivers

lies therefore in their linguistic ability. The more the leader is capable to use language to influence the process of sensemaking of his employees (his discursive ability), the more power he has.

Cunliffe (2001) and Holman & Thorpe (2003) have a similar view on power. They describe the manager as the author of his organization. They do not use the notions of sensemaking and sensegiving literally, but their use of the notion of conversation is quite similar. The manager uses conversation on the one hand for himself to give meaning to the organizational reality. This is similar to the process of sensemaking. On the other hand, the manager can also use conversation to influence the construction of reality by others in the organization, for example their employees. Here we see a clear parallel with sensegiving. Here too, power lies with the manager. By playing his role as author of the organization well, see the parallel with the 'discursive ability' of Maitlis & Lawrence (2007), the manager can exert power over his employees.

The focus of power seen from the perspective of sensegiving and authorship places strong emphasis on the concrete actions of individuals. Individuals, often leaders or managers, are the subjects of power. In the figure of Burns & Scapens (2000) one could say that the emphasis here is on the move 'from below', namely the influence of individual actions on the institutional level. My criticism is that a strong distinction is suggested between sensemaking and sensegiving. In this distinction, there is on the one hand the group of sensemakers. These are the employees of the organization, who are still searching for a meaning of the reality that surrounds them. On the other hand, there is the group of sensegivers. These are the leaders or managers who have already constructed a meaning and try to transfer this to their employees. This seems to me as a simplification. First, because it is highly questionable whether it is always leaders and managers who have first constructed a meaning and who have the largest influence on the employees of the organization. But second, and this is a more fundamental point, because the question is whether the processes of sensemaking and sensegiving can be differentiated at all. Sensemaking and sensegiving are no sequential processes: one does not first construct a meaning (sensemaking) and then start influencing the process of meaning construction of others (sensegiving). These processes evolve simultaneously. People are constantly constructing meaning. The process of sensemaking goes on all the time. But during the process of sensemaking there can also simultaneously be sensegiving. Constructing meaning is indeed an interactive process, it is about *social* construction of meaning. And in that process the different participants affect each other. This is not always a conscious strategy, as Maitlis (2005), Maitlis & Lawrence (2007), Cunliffe (2001) and Holman & Thorpe (2003) suggest. Influencing others happens while one is still searching for meaning oneself. The influence is often a side effect of this search. And the influencing often also occurs mutually. This raises the question who is the subject and owner of power. Is it the sensegivers? If this is the case, who are the sensegivers? Because if sensegiving is mainly the mutual influencing of each other, then every person is simultaneously sensegiver and

sensemaker, power exerciser and someone over whom power is exercised. These roles can hardly be separated. One may sometimes think that one 'has' power and affects the sensemaking of others, while meanwhile, unconsciously, one is influenced by others in his own sensemaking process. The question arises as to whether the phenomenon of power should be positioned in the process of sensegiving rather than in the individuals involved in it. This idea is, in different terms, elaborated by Foucault. I follow Foucault's view on power, described below, and not that of the authors mentioned above. Their view does not do justice to the complexity of sensemaking and discursive processes.

### 1.5.2     Discourse as power/knowledge

As mentioned Foucault argues from the concept of discourse. Power also plays an important role in his theory. Foucault describes discourse as 'power/knowledge'. This already shows the close connection Foucault sees between discourse, knowledge and power. To Foucault discourse is that which defines reality. Reality is discursively constructed. Our knowledge of reality is therefore also discursively constructed. It is not 'factual' knowledge of an objective reality outside of us, but knowledge is constructed in the discourses in which we participate.

Torring (1999) describes the role of power in Foucault. To Foucault power is not something that a subject can 'possess'. It is something that lies within discourse itself.

*"According to Foucault [...], power is neither an effect of institutions or structures nor a certain strength that we are endowed with. Power must be defined nominalistically 'as the name one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a society'"*

Torring 1999, 162

Torring, who gives in his book an overview of the discourse approaches of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Slavoj Žižek, uses the term 'hegemony' to explain the power aspect of discourse. Torring defines hegemony as:

*"[t]he achievement of a moral, intellectual and political leadership through the expansion of a discourse that partially fixes meaning around nodal points. Hegemony involves more than a passive consensus and more than legitimate actions. It involves the expansion of a particular discourse of norms, values, views and perceptions through persuasive redescriptions of the world"*

Torring 1999, 302

Different discourses exist in society next to one another. These discourses try to obtain hegemony over other discourses. A discourse that has hegemony influences society, because it gives a specific meaning to the world which by the people in society is seen as 'the truth' or 'the way things go'. Power, through which a discourse obtains hegemony over other discourses, is located in

this view within the discourse and not with certain people. People cannot 'possess' power. People as subjects participating in discourses are also constituted themselves. Subjectivity is also discursively constructed. Therefore, a subject participating in a discourse can never own and use power, because he is also constituted by the discourse himself. For the same reason, a subject cannot 'use' a discourse. The discourse is always larger than the subject.

Powers (2007) also describes the relationship Foucault sees between discourse and power. Discourses are power mechanisms in our social reality. Between people power is exercised by discourses. Certain points are important and partly linked to the comments I made in the previous section on the connection between power and sensegiving.

The first point is the same as the one Torfing (1999) made: according to Foucault power is not something that can be obtained, possessed or shared by anyone. "It is *embodied* or *performed* through the interplay of non-equal and changing relations of force in a specific context" (Powers 2007, 30). In other words, power is not something that individuals can 'own', but power 'happens' in discourse. Participants in a discourse contribute to discourse, but they cannot (completely) control what 'happens' in discourse. This does not mean that the influence of individual participants on the discourse cannot differ from one to another, but this influence is always limited. After all, they contribute to the discourse, but they are also influenced by the discourse. If at all there is a subject of power, then it is discourse. Within and through the discourse power is 'exercised'.

A second point Powers (2007) makes is that according to Foucault power works not only 'top-down'. Power is not only exercised by authorities over subordinates, but on many levels. Power is independent of hierarchies and for example also takes place within groups of authorities or groups of subordinates. In any discourse, even at the smallest level, power 'happens'. In the connection between different discourses at a higher level of abstraction, a certain power factor can occur, but this is not bound to the until then prevailing hierarchies and existing authorities. Indeed, these hierarchies and authorities can also shift.

A third point is that according to Foucault power is not intentional. This is related to the first point, that there are no 'owners' of power, but that power 'happens'. Although power, exercised in and through discourses, can have large effects, there is no a priori strategy behind it. There is no a priori intended result or effect, it happens quite naturally. According to Foucault the effect of power as exercised through the discourse develops historically, not intentionally. Through the historical development of the discourse a certain effect of power develops, but this is only gradually.

## **1.6    *The economic crisis as discourse***

As I indicated earlier in this chapter, the economic crisis is a constructed reality. People gave a common meaning to the events that occurred from the end of 2008 by addressing them as 'the economic crisis'. This took a while, because this process of sensemaking is always retrospective. Afterwards things were related to each other into a (retrospectively) logical whole, while these things did not make sense to people at first. When one asks a person nowadays how the economic crisis emerged in late 2008, one probably gets a logically coherent story of cause and effect. One gets a story in which some important events are mentioned and others are omitted. Meanwhile a clear story about the crisis has developed. A discourse, as it can also be called. Indeed, language plays an important role when it comes to the meaning of the economic crisis. People have found words to describe the origin and effects of the economic crisis. After the search of the first period, in which several attempts were made to arrive at a clear discourse and where different labels were used (for example credit crisis, banking crisis, financial crisis), the dominant discourse about the economic crisis is now rather firmly embedded in our social community.

### **1.6.1    *The power of the crisis discourse***

In the previous section I argued that the concept of power plays an important role in social construction and discourses. In the discourse of the economic crisis, this is also the case. The way in which in this discourse meaning is given to the various events that constitute the economic crisis has affected the way people act in response to this crisis. I will give an example to illustrate this.

In the dominant discourse, the economic crisis is seen as an interruption of the normal course of the economy, a disruption of the economic system. People search for the causes of this disturbance and then take actions to remove these causes and thereby allow the economy to return to its normal, healthy situation again. An example of this is the role that soon was assigned to 'the banks' in the discourse. They were assumed to have ushered the beginning of the crisis, by introducing unhealthy banking products (especially the so-called sub-prime mortgages). This led to the call for measures for the banking sector, for example, stricter regulations from the government. This would make the banking sector 'healthy' again and might help to prevent such a crisis the next time. This increase of government intervention was at odds with the idea of a free market that was dominant in certain circles, but in the current situation it was still considered necessary as a means to save the free market economy in the longer term.

In his book *The sublime object of ideology* (Žižek 2008), the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek gives an alternative explanation of the concept of 'economic crisis'. He states, from his Marxist perspective, that an economic crisis is not a crisis *within* the system, a deviation from the normal course of the economy, where one tries to make it end as soon as possible and to return to the normal economic situation. According to Žižek an economic crisis is a crisis *of* the system. The

crisis shows the flaws of the system and why the system is ultimately wrong. In the next quote he states this as follows:

*"Marx' great achievement was to demonstrate how all phenomena which appear to everyday bourgeois consciousness as simple deviations, contingent deformations and degenerations of the 'normal' functioning of society (economic crisis, wars, and so on), and as such abolishable through amelioration of the system, are necessary products of the system itself – the points at which the 'truth', the immanent antagonistic character of the system, erupts. To 'identify with a system' means to recognize in the 'excesses', in the disruptions of the 'normal' way of things, the key offering us access to its true functioning."*

Žižek 2008, 144

Žižek refers to Marx and shows how the power of discourse can be seen here. Žižek uses not directly the term 'discourse', but for him the notion of 'ideology' has a central place. However, both concepts have strong similarities, as I will explain in section 3.1.3. The discourse of an economic crisis as a deviation, a disruption of the normal course of the economy leads, according to Žižek, to interventions that try to improve the (capitalist) system. People try to make the system even better, to make it function even purer, so that such a deviation can be prevented in the future. By removing failures from the system, if necessary even by use of measures that do not really fit into the system (for example government regulation in the banking sector), capitalism can function better and such crises can be prevented in the future. This is the kind of actions to which the discourse of the economic crisis leads: causes outside the system (moral crisis, individual errors) are detected and cracked down. According to Žižek, what is really at stake thus remains unaffected. The actual cause of the crisis is the capitalist system itself. The crisis is not a corruption of the system, but an inevitable consequence of it. It is the system itself that leads to an economic crisis. According to Žižek the real solution would therefore be to crack down the system itself. The fact that this does not happen is the power of the discourse, or in Žižek's words the ideology: the discourse protects the system.

The above example shows how the discourse of the economic crisis evolves on an international level. The discourse of the economic crisis evolves at the level of the system, or in Žižek's words: capitalism versus Marxism. One might argue that Žižek's use of discursive theory is quite one-sided. Žižek has a strongly Marxist perspective, and this perspective also influences his interpretation of Foucault and his use of the concept of discourse. But in this example it is interesting to see the collision of two different discourses or ideologies in which the causes and effects of the economic crisis are socially constructed. Žižek, from the perspective of a different discourse, shows the discursive nature of the economic crisis. And at the same time, he shows the power that 'happens' in such a discourse. The meaning given to the economic crisis influences the actions of people in response to this crisis.



### 1.6.2     *The discourse of the economic crisis at a local level*

In my research, I chose to look at the economic crisis on a local level: the level of two individual Dutch municipalities. This is obviously a different scale than the economic crisis at an international or a national level, but in principle the story is similar. Also at a local level the economic crisis is a social construction, discursively formed by the various players at this level and influenced by broader discourses on a regional, national and international level. I chose this local level of municipalities because of my background as a management consultant, as I explained at the beginning of this chapter. Because of this professional background, I visited quite a few municipalities and I soon realized that the economic crisis had a significant impact on these municipalities. I also saw the quest of many municipalities and for that reason I decided to focus my research on this level. This choice for a research at the local level of municipalities also had some advantages for how I could operationalize my research. Because of my focus on local discourses, even discourses within specific groups within the community, I had the opportunity to follow these discourses very closely. I had full access to documents and meetings of these groups and could speak to all of the participants. Because of this I could examine and describe the discourses very closely.

In the two groups in two different Dutch municipalities that I studied, I observed how the local discourse of the economic crisis evolved. I studied the economic crisis as a discourse, as a social construction. What characterized the groups was that they were formed specifically for this topic, the economic crisis, and consisted of people from different organizations. There were not only people from the municipality, but also representatives of local entrepreneurs, healthcare organizations, schools, banks, the Chamber of Commerce or housing associations. And from the municipalities there were both aldermen and civil servants in the groups. All these different people knew each other to a greater or lesser extent from one-on-one conversations or from other contexts, but this particular composition was new to them. I could therefore follow these particular group processes quite well, because the groups did not meet outside the meetings that I attended. In these groups, I looked at the development of the discourse of the economic crisis. I looked both at the input of specific members of the groups and at the impact of wider discourses from a regional, national and international level. The concept of power also played a role in this. On the one hand the power from those broader discourses, that formed the framework for the local discourse. But on the other hand, also the power that manifested itself in the local discourse and that affected the actions of the groups or the individual members of the groups.

My research thus focuses on a discursive reality. This is a reality as a social construct, established and developing in interaction between people. This raises the question of how to study such a discursive reality. How can a discursive reality be known, understood or even explained? With this

question I move from ontology to epistemology. It is the move from the question 'What is the crisis?' to 'How can I know that crisis?'. And this is also the move from chapter 1 to chapter 2.

## 2 What the bleep do we know!?

The way in which I examined the economic crisis in this research, namely as discourse, is closely linked to the way I look at academic research in general. This is again linked to the way I look at knowledge and the development and transmission of knowledge. This kind of epistemological questions I cover in this chapter. I start in a broad and general sense, but gradually make the translation to this concrete research and to myself as a researcher.

### 2.1 *Contingency*

In Chapter 1, I argued that we as humans construct a social reality. We do this through language (Berger & Luckmann 1966, Weick 1995). In interaction with the people around us we make sense of what we see and experience. Reality is not something 'out there', with an objective factual truth that we can discover. We cannot consider ourselves separate from the reality that we are trying to get to know. As soon as we try to know and understand reality, we construct this reality by making sense of it. The discourses we are part of and in which we actively participate help us to understand reality but at the same time construct it. This complex relationship between the 'being' of reality and the 'knowledge' of it, between ontology and epistemology, is expressed in the notion of contingency. In this section I describe the notion of contingency primarily referring to the American philosopher Richard Rorty. Rorty gives a clear and thorough description of the concept of contingency and takes a quite radical position himself. I use his description to explain the concept of contingency, but I also criticize the position Rorty takes. My critique mainly focuses on the fact that Rorty takes quite an individual perspective. He sees the process of reality construction primarily as an act of the individual actor and the interactive aspect of reality construction (that which makes it a *social* construction) plays a smaller role in Rorty's ideas. Especially on this aspect I will criticize Rorty, later on in this chapter. First I start with a description of the concept of contingency, based on Rorty.

#### 2.1.1     Vocabularies

According to Rorty (2008a and 2008b) truth is not something 'out there'. He argues that truth is made within a language-game. Thus, also for Rorty, language plays a central role. He states that language use is contingent. This means that the words we use to describe reality are tied to the context in which they are used. They could also have been other words, but because of many factors (historical factors, contextual factors) we use these specific words. The question is not whether these words, this vocabulary, are suited to describe reality or whether there may be other words that are more consistent with reality. Words cannot be 'consistent with' reality; they are always 'only' means to make sense of reality. Rorty disagrees with what he calls metaphysical philosophy, which refers to a self-existent truth 'out there' which the philosopher seeks to find.

Rorty makes a distinction between Plato's notion of truth, where truth exists somewhere outside of us, and Kant's notion of truth, where truth exists inside man's consciousness. Rorty disagrees with both by stating that truth does not exist in this metaphysical sense. There is no truth that corresponds to reality and which we can know or to which our words can or should refer. Truth exists only within the boundaries of our language use. There is no ideal image to which our words should refer, and therefore no ideal image to which the correctness of these words could be measured. Words cannot correspond to a greater or lesser extent to this ideal image, simply because the ideal image does not exist. According to Rorty our words, our vocabularies, can only be measured to the degree in which they are useful to us to deal with reality. Do they offer us meanings, truths with which we can cope? This is the pragmatic approach that Rorty proposes. But this pragmatic approach means that the meanings and truths that our vocabularies provide are also strongly tied to the context in which they are used. To some, they can be very useful, while to others they are not useful at all. Truths are thus strongly tied to a particular culture or group or even to a particular person.

Looking at the notion of truth this way has important consequences, also academically. 'A truth' in this vision has quite a different character than 'Truth' in other metaphysical visions. Truth according to Rorty is not universal, but to some degree always private. There is not one truth, but there are many different truths. Truths cannot compete with each other or be mutually exclusive. There is no comparison possible based on which one could determine which truth is better. Truths are coexistent. Truths cannot be tested against a universal standard (the Truth), but against the usability for users of a particular vocabulary (the pragmatic norm). Therefore, one cannot speak of progressive insight or scientific progress. At least not in the metaphysical sense that science is getting closer to the truth. Scientific development is rather the change from one vocabulary to another, because this alternative vocabulary fits better to the context. That is to say, it is more useful to the users of the vocabulary in their sensemaking process. Rorty uses two metaphors to illustrate this: the metaphor of the puzzle and that of the tool. In metaphysical philosophy people try to solve a puzzle. People believe that in the past a lot of pieces already have been put in place, and that they are trying to put in place the last pieces (solve the remaining problems, fill the last gaps in our knowledge). So one is always one step further than one's predecessors. Science in this vision is approaching at some point the ultimate knowledge of the truth, which is when the last pieces of the puzzle are put in place. The image that Rorty uses for his own contingent vision is that of a philosophy that develops tools. He borrows this idea from Wittgenstein. The task of philosophy, according to Rorty, is to develop tools (vocabularies) that are more suitable for solving the philosopher's issues. Which tools are most useful depends on the problems that the philosopher wants to solve? Therefore, in a particular context a particular tool can be more useful. This does not mean that this tool is also better than any other tool, because in another context, for another problem, another tool can be more useful. In academics one uses a particular vocabulary

as a tool because it is, or appears to be, the most useful. This does not mean that this vocabulary is better than another or that it should be applied universally. The vocabulary used is only considered to be the most useful in this particular context.

### 2.1.2      *The ironic scholar*

Rorty's contingency theory also has consequences for the philosopher, or in a broader sense for every person who adheres to this theory. According to Rorty not only language, but also man himself is contingent. Man's purpose is not to live up to a certain ideal image, just as it is not man's purpose to find the Truth. We just are who we are, contingently shaped by many factors. This means that we cannot claim universal validity of our statements or ideas. Both we and our language are contingent, shaped by the context in which we find ourselves. In any other context, our words and ideas lose their self-evidence. Rorty calls the person who realizes this an ironist. The ironist is aware of his own contingency and that of his language. He realizes that what he thinks and says is relevant within his own context, but not necessarily outside of it. According to Rorty, the ironist is therefore primarily concerned with what he calls 'self-creation', shaping his own existence, making sense of his own life. The ironist is less concerned with the public domain. This is because from his contingent vocabulary he cannot say much about the public domain. What is useful for himself and makes sense to him does not have to do the same to others.

According to Rorty this ironic attitude is difficult to realize, in particular for the scholar. A scholar wants to make statements with a wider validity (or usability, according to the ironist's vocabulary) than just his own individual context. What is the use of scholars who make statements that are only useful for themselves? The ironic scholar, Rorty says, therefore runs the risk of stepping into the metaphysical trap. This trap means that one, despite of the awareness of the contingency of everything including oneself, still tries to make statements of a non-contingent nature. Rorty understands the lure of this trap very well, because people are inclined to consider their own ideas as universal, or at least as broadly applicable. However, this gives the illusion to be closer to the truth, and once this happens, one becomes a metaphysician again. Rorty describes in his book some philosophers who, despite their ironic attitude, stepped into the metaphysical pitfall: Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger. Each of them ends up creating an ideal image (Hegel's World Spirit, Nietzsche's Übermensch and Heidegger's Dasein). By doing this they abandon their contingency thinking, which each of them according to Rorty adheres.

One philosopher who, according to Rorty, is really consistent in his ironicism, is Derrida. He does not step into the metaphysical pitfall. Especially his later work, for example *Envois*, shows how Derrida uses texts with a 'private' character, in this case postcards. He writes about very personal ideas and develops his own new vocabulary. He does not present his ideas or his vocabulary as 'public' truths. In interviews Derrida avoids discussion with others to defend or argue about his

ideas. According to Rorty this is an example of how an ironic scholar proceeds: writing texts, creating a new vocabulary that extends the existing conceptual frameworks and so shifting the limits of what is possible. But all of this without pretending to formulate truths with any universal character.

According to Rorty the ironic scholar is primarily engaged in self-creation and the development of his own vocabulary. More pretensions the ironist should not and cannot have. Rorty therefore warns against the metaphysical pitfall: the pitfall to pretend more general usability. However, the fact that the ironic scholar cannot *pretend* a more general usability does not mean that his ideas cannot *be used* in a more general way. The new vocabulary that an ironist develops can very well be useful for other people. The new way of speaking, the new meanings that the ironist constructs in his vocabulary, may also be useful for other people in their process of sensemaking. The question here is mainly how inspiring the vocabulary of the ironist is to other people. This is not about arguments that the ironist uses in order to convince people. The point is not to ensure the accuracy of the vocabulary or the extent to which the vocabulary 'corresponds to reality'. It all comes down to the practical usefulness for the individual, primarily for the ironist himself. The vocabulary of the ironist can however also be inspiring to others and convince them that it might also be useful to them. They may be tempted to use the vocabulary, or parts of it, as their own vocabulary. In this way, the ironist thus indeed can be of a more general relevance by enriching the vocabularies of others. However, this relevance cannot be demonstrated based on arguments. It is the pragmatic usefulness for other individuals that determines the range of the ironist's relevance.

### 2.1.3 Contingency and irony in interaction

To a large extent I follow Rorty in his way of speaking about contingency and irony. However, I differ from him on an important point. This has to do with the notion of interaction. Rorty's starting point is the individual vocabulary of the ironist. He argues that every individual has his own vocabulary, that this vocabulary is contingent and that it can only be tested based on pragmatic grounds, that is based on the usefulness for the individual. According to Rorty, it is not possible to convince each other based on arguments. However, Rorty already indicates that different individuals can influence each other. This happens when one inspires another and a useful vocabulary comes forward. This aspect of interaction is in my view of a greater importance than Rorty suggests.

In chapter 1 I introduced the concept of 'discourse'. This also plays a role here. When it comes to the exchange of knowledge, for example among scholars, this happens through discourses that are formed and developed in interaction between individuals. These discourses are not the same as the vocabularies that Rorty is talking about. The vocabulary is an individual 'word-stock' of, in this

case, an individual scholar. Between the vocabularies of different individuals there can be much overlap, but there are always differences. In short, the vocabulary is always linked to an individual. In a discourse this is not the case. A discourse is not linked to individuals, but is much more independent. In a discourse by definition multiple individuals take part, by using (parts of) their vocabularies. People use words from their vocabularies in the discourse in which they participate. Within the discourse, these words help to construct a shared meaning. The discourse is therefore always larger than the (vocabularies of its) participants. Moreover, although the discourse is formed by the individuals who participate in it, the discourse also affects these individuals. In section 1.5 I elaborated on this, when I talked about the power of discourse. There I described how power lies not in the hands of individuals, but is exercised through discourse. The discourse exerts power over individuals. People who participate in a discourse shape this discourse together, contribute to its development, but are also strongly influenced by the discourse in which they participate. This also applies to the vocabularies of these people. These vocabularies are also affected by the discourse in which they participate. This means that between the vocabularies of the various participants in a discourse there is always a certain overlap: these vocabularies are partly influenced by the same discourse. Within the framework of this discourse these participants interact with each other, each from their own vocabulary. Rorty's statement that vocabularies of different individuals never fully match is right. This has to do with the fact that each individual participates in a range of discourses and that this palette never fully matches with that of other individuals. Everyone's vocabulary is always influenced by partly different discourses than those of others. But interaction between vocabularies can indeed take place, within the framework of a shared discourse.

When it comes to the exchange of knowledge, which is the subject of this chapter, then this is also something that happens within discourses. Knowledge is a social phenomenon. Knowledge does not exist within the vocabulary of an individual, but within a discourse in which several people participate. In section 1.5 I was referring to Foucault who describes discourse as 'power/knowledge' and I focused on the first part of this definition. However, next to the connection between discourse and power Foucault also points to the close connection between discourse and knowledge. Power cannot be obtained, possessed or shared by individuals. Power 'happens' within discourse. The same applies for knowledge. Knowledge also cannot be acquired, possessed or shared, but 'happens' within discourse. This has everything to do with the concept of 'meaning'. Words get their meaning within a social context, as I argued in chapter 1. Scholars all have their own vocabularies as their tools, but the words of these tools only make sense within the discourse in which they are used, for example between scholars. It is only then that these words get their meaning. And it is only then that one can speak of 'knowledge'.

Rorty's contingency theory thus remains intact. I only emphasize the role of interaction more than he does. Our knowledge is contingent: shaped by the circumstances and valid only within our own specific context. However, this context is not an individual context, but an inter-personal one, the context of a discourse. Knowledge always exists within a certain discourse, but within a different discourse this knowledge can be 'meaningless'. This is the contingent nature of knowledge. Rorty described his contingency theory particularly from the perspective of philosophy, especially where it concerns the interaction between philosophers or between philosophers and other people. My research can be placed in the social sciences. From the perspective of the social sciences the contingency theory gets an extra dimension, which I discuss in the next section.

#### 2.1.4      *The ironic social scientist*

In the previous sections I described my position as an ironic scholar. However, my research can be placed within a specific branch of science: the social sciences. I study people, human behavior, from my ironic position. This has some specific consequences for how I did my research and how I write about it in this book.

I consider the behavior of the people I have studied in my research as contingent: as their search for a useful vocabulary to describe reality. The fact that I consider the behavior of the people I've studied as contingent means that I see the behavior of each person as 'shaped by the circumstances'. I consider behavior as the actions of this one individual within the discourses in which he or she participates. I do not look for universal statements about human behavior in general. I try to appreciate the uniqueness of the behavior of every human being and to recognize and acknowledge the contingent character of it. This means that in my description of behavior I pay attention to its context (historical, geographical, et cetera): I describe the behavior in its current, often capricious context instead of abstracting it to a general description of behavior that is comparable to the behavior of others. This way of describing human behavior also means that in my research it is difficult to compare the two municipalities that I describe. My goal is not to make general statements based on these two municipalities. The number of municipalities is too limited to do this. But my choice is more fundamental: no matter what the number of municipalities is, making general statements about human behavior does not reflect the contingent nature of this human behavior. By doing this, the unique and authentic elements of individual behavior are disregarded.

The position I take here is close to that of the so called ethnographic literature. Burawoy (1998) describes the challenge that social scientists face as follows: "As social scientists we are thrown off balance by our presence in the world we study, by absorption in the society we observe, by dwelling alongside those we make "other"" (Burawoy 1998, 4). At the beginning of chapter 1 I shortly described my personal background and interests. From my profession as a consultant in the



public sector I look at municipalities from a certain discourse. This affects my personal vocabulary, with which I also describe the municipalities in my research. The same applies to the discourse in which I participate as a researcher. I described this discourse partly so far. From this discourse, studying municipalities is about social structures, institutions, discourses and contingency. This also affects my personal vocabulary, with which I describe these municipalities. But as a researcher I also participate in the discourses that exist in the municipalities themselves. Although I stayed in the background as much as possible, I also became part of the discourses in the municipalities. This means that my vocabulary was influenced by the groups that I studied, but also that I influenced the discourses of the groups that I studied. I will come back to this point more extensively later.

## **2.2 *Relativism?***

Any scholar who starts from the idea that knowledge is contingent has to deal with the question of relativism. If there is no absolute truth 'out there', based on what can one make any truth claims? If all knowledge is depending on context, based on what can be still say what is true or false, right or wrong? These questions are not only epistemological, but also ethical. After all, the contingency of our knowledge does not only affect what we can consider as 'true', but also what we consider as good or bad behavior, based on these truth claims.

The response to the question of relativism depends on one's position regarding to contingency. Rorty (2008a), from his rather extreme position of individual contingent vocabularies, struggles with the question of relativism. His response comes down to an acknowledgement that his ironic scholar does not have the means to convince others of his statements. The only thing the ironic scholar can do is try to inspire others to take over (parts of) his vocabulary. Rorty hereby takes a quite extreme relativist position, where any basis for common knowledge is gone. This is the consequence of his position, starting from the contingent individual vocabulary.

There are, however, other ways to deal with the question of relativism. My own position differs from Rorty's, based on the same critique on Rorty I stated before: in his reply to the criticism of relativism Rorty again argues strongly from an individual point of view. But the individual vocabulary is always expressed in discourses in which more people participate. Within these discourses people construct meaning, they make sense of reality. So the contingent nature applies to the individual vocabulary, in the sense that each individual vocabulary is different, but I would rather emphasize the contingent nature of discourse. Within each discourse people negotiate about meanings. In interaction people together determine what meaning they give to reality. This meaning is contingent, because in another discourse a different meaning can be 'negotiated'. But this contingent character of the discourse does not mean that knowledge claims are impossible.

These knowledge claims are not based on an absolute truth 'out there', but there is definitely a basis for the knowledge claims a scholar makes. This basis is the discursive context within which the knowledge claims are made. This means, in response to the criticism of relativism, that the individual researcher cannot just say anything. His individual vocabulary becomes meaningful within the framework of a larger discourse and this discourse is larger than the individual. Within the discourse there definitely is a shared meaning and that is a shared truth for the participants of the discourse. So the individual researcher is 'bound' to the discourse in which he partakes, if he wants to say something 'meaningful'.

Moreover, also other discourses can play a role in the knowledge claims of an individual scholar. A scholar will always take part in several discourses, and his knowledge claims will have to be meaningful in these different discourses. In the next paragraph, I will give an example of the different discourses in which I partake in this research. This interaction of different discourses even broadens the basis for knowledge claims. Different discourses can influence each other, and knowledge claims will have to 'account' to different discourses in order to be meaningful.

The position I describe here differs from the positivistic position regarding knowledge. In positivism knowledge is much more static, because of the link of knowledge to an absolute truth. The evolution of knowledge is similar to the metaphor of the puzzle (Rorty 2008a): each new piece of knowledge is added to the already existing body of knowledge, and bit by bit we come closer to the total picture. But the total picture is fixed, it does not change over time.

In my view knowledge is more fluent. Knowledge exists in a discursive community and evolves with this community. New knowledge claims are valuable if they have meaning in the discourses in which they are introduced. This value of knowledge claims can evolve over time, just as discourses and discursive communities evolve. This gives knowledge a much more organic and emerging character. Burawoy describes this when he speaks about 'reflexive science':

*"Dialogue is the unifying principle of reflexive science. (...) Theories do not spring tabula rasa from the data but are carried forward through intellectual debate and division. They then reenter the wider world of participants, there to be adopted, refuted and extended in intended and unintended ways, circulating back into science. Science offers no final truth, no certainties, but exists in a state of continual revision."*

Burawoy 1998, 16

In short, one could conclude that the positivist position of knowledge is a static, impersonal one. Rorty's position, on the other side of the spectrum, is the individual position of a relativist. I hold the in-between position that knowledge is emerging in interpersonal relations. This position has consequences for the way a scholar should 'account' for the knowledge claims he produces. I will do so later in this chapter, when I discuss the work of Sandberg (2005).

## **2.3 *The nature and audience of this academic text***

This academic text is a contingent text. In this text, I try to account transparently for the discourses in which I participate and which influence my vocabulary. I hope that my research contributes to these discourses and therefore it is important to address them explicitly. I wrote this book with a specific audience in mind. I realized that a text is not accessible nor interesting for everyone. This book is, to a certain degree, a rather personal text, because it is about my own role as a researcher and it contains language that comes from my own vocabulary. People with different vocabularies may not wish to follow me. The audience I address consists of people who share at least part of my vocabulary, be it from the same academic discourse, the same practical discourse or otherwise. Different audiences can thus be distinguished. In this paragraph I introduce these audiences; in chapter 7 I describe the contribution of my research to the discourses of these different audiences.

### **2.3.1 *Academic audience***

The first audience that I address with this book is an academic audience. The academic discourse in which I participate influences my vocabulary and hence the language of this text. In the first chapters of this book I account for this, by explaining a number of important concepts from my vocabulary: social structures, institutions, sensemaking, discourses, power, contingency, et cetera. I hope to contribute to this academic discourse by showing how I use these concepts and how I combine them in my vocabulary. This is not entirely new, because I refer to various authors: Foucault, Rorty and many others. Yet my contribution to these discourses is different, because I contribute from my own specific vocabulary. I hope to contribute to discourses around one or more of the concepts that I described above. In chapter 3, I will describe this more precisely, in particular by elaborating more on the concept of 'discourse'. It is especially to the various discourses about the notion of 'discourse' that I intend to contribute. I do this through the concrete interpretation of the concept that I give in chapter 3, the connection that I make, especially in chapters 1 and 2, with other concepts, and the way in which I use the concept of 'discourse' in my empirical research, which I describe in chapter 4, 5 and 6.

### **2.3.2 *Audience of practitioners***

The second audience I address with this book is an audience of practitioners. This audience can be divided into two different groups.

First, there are the members of the two groups that I have studied in my empirical research. In this description of my research, and specifically in chapters 5 and 6 where I describe my empirical research, the influence of the discourses of the groups on my vocabulary is inevitably present. On the other hand, my research has also influenced the discourses of the groups and this description of my research, specifically my description of the groups, will also affect the discourses of the

groups. The members of both groups know about my research and have seen that I followed them for a period of one year. Some of them I also interviewed. They will probably be interested in this book and I consider them as part of my audience. I intend to contribute to the discourses in these groups by the way in which I describe their situation. This will probably be not quite as they expect. Indeed, I have a specific theoretical perspective, because I look at the discourses that exist within these groups. My vocabulary will therefore be partly new to them. Nevertheless, I expect that I can add to their discourse. Especially because of this (to them) different and surprising approach. The vocabulary that I use will include words that are partly familiar to them, but it will also include words that are new to them or that they know only in a different context or meaning. This may possibly enrich their discourse.

There is a second audience of practitioners. These are people that are interested in my research because of their practice background. This is again not a very homogeneous group. It can include people who work in Dutch municipalities and who are involved in similar groups like the ones I have studied in my empirical research. It can also include people who know me and know of my research and for that reason are interested in the outcome. These are for example the colleagues and customers I work with as a management consultant. In chapter 1 I have indicated that the discourses in which I participated as a management consultant for the public sector have influenced my choice for the subject of this study: the economic crisis, and specifically its impact on Dutch municipalities. I hope that my research will enrich the discourses in which I participate. In my case this means for example that my research will contribute to the discourse of management consultants within the Dutch public sector, but also to that of other people within Dutch municipalities. I expect that the way in which I look at organizations may be relevant to them. Again, as with the public from the two groups, my vocabulary will be largely unknown to this audience. Concepts such as social construction or discourse will not directly be familiar to them. But the way I use these concepts in my description of the two municipalities can provide a new, different way of looking at Dutch municipalities responding to the economic crisis, or even broader at organizations in general. I hope therefore to be relevant to this group by giving new concepts that they can add to their vocabulary and that might enrich the discourses in which they participate.

### 2.3.3     *Myself as an audience*

A third audience that I address with this book is of a different kind than the other audiences: I myself am this audience. I write this book partly for myself. This research has contributed to my own vocabulary. The discourses I have participated in during this research, both the academic and the practice discourses, enriched my vocabulary and therefore also enriched myself. This book in which I write my story of this research can be seen as a culmination of this. In this book I put into words what this research has yielded me. Therefore, it is also partly addressed to myself.

The fact that I consider myself as an audience of this book, is connected to the concept of 'self-creation', which plays a role in both Foucault (Doorman & Pott 2005, Huijer 2011) and Rorty (2008a). Both philosophers emphasize the importance for individuals to create themselves. For Rorty this has to do with the concept of the 'ironist' that I introduced earlier in this chapter. This ironist is aware of his own contingency and refrains from doing 'public' statements. He is busy creating his own contingent vocabulary and by doing that he creates himself. When other people are influenced and possibly inspired to take over parts of his vocabulary, he considers this only as a possible side effect. This is not the ironist's aim. I nuanced this image of Rorty's ironist, by stressing the interactive (discursive) nature of the formation of the individual vocabulary. That is also why I am writing to several groups of audiences. Still I consider myself an ironist, in the sense that I realize that my vocabulary is always contingent and always remains personal. The formation of my vocabulary by the different discourses in which I took part in this research is therefore to a large extent the formation of myself. In this research I reflect regularly on the way this 'self-creation' took place. For that reason, I explicitly pay attention to my role as a researcher several times in this research.

The different discourses in which I participate in this research, interact and influence each other. Like Burawoy says:

*"Reflexive science sets out from a dialogue between us and them, between social scientists and the people we study. It does not spring from an Archimedean point outside space and time; it does not create knowledge or theory tabula rasa. It starts out from a stock of academic theory on the one side and existent folk theory or indigenous narratives on the other. Both sides begin their interaction from real locations."*

Burawoy 1998, 7

This book, as an end product of my research, may become part of the various discourses in which I participate. As I have already mentioned in section 1.4, discourses are composed of different texts (Phillips et al. 2004, 636). This book can become such a text in the various discourses in which I participate, or even broader, in the discourses where this book is read.

## **2.4 The role of the researcher**

Much has been said already about my role as a researcher, explicitly or implicitly. For example, that I am not an outsider who looks at municipalities from a distance and who describes objective facts about these municipalities. As a researcher, I am also part of my research. I am also not looking for an objective truth about the municipalities that I study. I study a constructed reality that I simultaneously construct myself. In the kind of research I perform and describe, it is quite

important who is the researcher. As I said earlier, my background, interests and character affect my research. But on the other hand, the groups that I study also affect me as a researcher.

#### 2.4.1      No validity and reliability in a positivistic sense

My view of research means that the requirements to academic research that are made in the positivistic tradition are not useful in my research. Many of these requirements aim to ensure that the knowledge gained in the research is compatible with 'Reality'. This also goes for the widely-used criteria of validity and reliability. As Sandberg states:

*"Validity and reliability are the criteria used for justifying knowledge produced within the positivistic tradition. These criteria are based on an objectivist epistemology that refers to an objective, notable reality beyond the human mind and that stipulates a correspondence criterion of truth"*

Sandberg 2005, 43

Validity is about the question whether the right conclusions are drawn from the research data. Or are there perhaps other conclusions possible based on the data? This often requires a clear demarcation of the research. Which part of reality is the research referring to? To what area do the conclusions apply? This is based on the assumption of a clear reality that allows no conflicting conclusions. In my research this criterion is not relevant, because I do not have this assumption of a uniform reality. From the contingency thinking that I described in this chapter, reality is continuously constructed by different groups of people. Reality is discursive and the description of it varies for each discourse. Therefore, the question of validity in this sense is also irrelevant, because research in my view is always connected to the person and the discourse of the researcher. Demarcation of the research is important. However, not because of the question to what part of reality the research refers, but because of the question within which discourse the research takes place.

The second criterion that is often used in academic research is reliability. This refers to whether the research data are reliable, that is, whether they are collected in a proper way. This criterion is mainly focused on research methods, processes and resources. Do they provide the right data, or can it be that the data are 'colored'? Behind this criterion is also an assumption, namely that it is possible to collect reliable data that are collected in an objective way. The idea with this criterion is that another researcher, if he would do the same research in the same way, should get the same research data. If that is the case, then the research can be called reliable. For my research this criterion is also irrelevant. Again, the assumption behind it does not fit in my view of academic research. Research data in my view are always 'colored' by the researcher, they are indeed contingent. Another researcher will always get different research data. That is inevitable, but not a problem. Indeed, the researcher must be transparent about this to avoid false expectations from his audience. Every researcher, and therefore every research, is contingent.

The current criteria of validity and reliability, from a positivist perspective, do not apply to my research. This is because the underlying ontology and epistemology of these criteria do not match with my ontology and epistemology. Or, as Burawoy says when he discusses the different presumptions of what he calls positive science and reflexive science (with the extended case method as its most used method): “The extended case method simply dances to another tune. Listen to the tune before evaluating the dance” (Burawoy 1998, 29). However, the criteria of validity and reliability can be used in a way that does fit in my ontology and epistemology. This makes it possible to use them as criteria for my research. Research as I perform should indeed also meet certain criteria. I must be able to account for the way I've done my research and for the results of my research. Three concepts play an important role in the way I account for my research: consistency, transparency and reflexivity. I explain these concepts here. They play an important role throughout this book.

#### 2.4.2      *Consistency: the connection between ontology, epistemology en methodology*

The concept of consistency means that the research is performed based on a coherent idea that is consistently applied. Consistency means that there are no internal contradictions in the research. The researcher has a contingent story, but that does not mean that it is not a consistent story. The researcher's view at reality, his ontology, should be congruent with his view at (obtaining) knowledge and academic research, his epistemology. This epistemology should then also be congruent with the way the researcher shapes his research, his methodology, and the methods and techniques with which he actually carries out his research.

Such a consistent idea I use in my research. The chapters of this book are congruent with the classification I mentioned. In chapter 1 I have described my ontology: my view on reality as a set of social structures in which discourses are formed and evolve. In this chapter 2 I describe my epistemology. I described my view on knowledge as a contingent phenomenon, linked to individual vocabularies. This knowledge arises and is formed in a discursive process, in line with what I said from an ontological point of view in chapter 1. In the next chapter, chapter 3, I describe my methodology. I will elaborate on the concept of 'discourse', and present the way in which I use discourse analysis. In Chapter 4 I then describe what methods I use to apply this methodology of discourse analysis in my research. The description of my empirical research, in chapters 5 and 6 are also in line with the view from the first four chapters. Chapter 7, the concluding chapter, has more the character of a final contemplation or epilogue than of a conclusion. Again, this is in line with the whole of my research.

Arranging and describing my research in a consistent way makes it more comprehensible to my audience. Although my research is contingent, attached to my person and described in my vocabulary, a reader who has a similar vocabulary (especially someone from the groups that I have described as my audience in section 2.4.3) should be able to follow the line in my research. The steps I take follow logically from this line. I hold myself accountable to this consistency. My story and vocabulary are contingent, readers can feel as if it is addressed to them or not, they may adopt it or not. But based on my story and vocabulary one cannot assess the academic character of my research. This is different for the consistency of my story. Based on the consistency of my story it can be assessed to what extent my research also has an academic character.

#### 2.4.3      *Validity in relation to lived experience*

From the consistent way I describe my research a few conclusions can be drawn about the concepts of validity and reliability. As mentioned before the concepts of validity and reliability need some further explanation. From a positivist perspective, the concepts are inconsistent with my ontology and epistemology. But also in other research perspectives these terms are used, such as interpretative research of which I consider my research an example.

According to Sandberg (2005) validity is focused on how the researcher "can justify that [his] interpretations are truthful to lived experience within the theoretical and methodological perspectives taken" (58). The term 'lived experience' plays an important role in Sandberg's view of (interpretative) research. It describes the focus of research, in line with the underlying ontology and epistemology of interpretive research. The researcher in this type of research is not looking for 'the' truth, but for the 'lived experience' of his subjects. When it comes to the validity of research, what matters according to Sandberg is not whether the research describes 'the' reality, but how it describes the 'lived experience' of the research objects. Sandberg makes a distinction between three types of validity. I describe them here, but in section 4.4 I will elaborate more on the way I dealt with these different types of validity.

The first type of validity is communicative validity. This type of validity is about "meaning coherence" (Sandberg 2005, 58), or the extent to which the research results are a good representation of the meaning the research objects give to reality, their lived experience. The communicative validity of a study can be enhanced by following specific steps (during the data collection, the analysis of the data or in the final stage of the analysis) that justify the researcher's interpretations. In my research I followed some of these steps. During the data collection, I explained to the members of the Task Force or the Leading Group why I attended their meetings or why I wanted to interview them. They were thus always aware of my research. I also tried to let the research objects tell their own stories as much as possible. During the meetings I influenced the process of the groups as little as possible, by being as reluctant as possible and not interfering



in their conversations. During the interviews I did use a topic list, but only quite loosely. I tried to give the interviewees enough space to tell their own story. This contributed to the creation of what Sandberg calls a "community of interpretation" (Sandberg 2005, 54). In the analysis of my empirical data, I also tried to come to coherent interpretations. I did this by being reluctant in drawing conclusions too quickly from single quotes or fragments. I always tried to look at quotations and fragments within their wider context. When I described my analysis of the municipalities, in chapter 5 and 6, I worked extensively with direct and relatively long quotations and fragments. Hereby I tried to take the context in consideration as much as possible. I also tried to place the loose fragments and quotations in a broader context by supporting my interpretations with multiple different quotes and fragments. All these steps have served to contribute to the communicative validity of my research. The aim of this was that my interpretations were consistent with what the research objects actually said.

The second type of validity Sandberg mentions is pragmatic validity. This refers to the extent to which the words of the research objects also match their actions. People may be inclined to describe their actions different than they really are. Sandberg mentions several reasons for this: "impression management, political action, moral storytelling, social codes, and cultural scripts" (Sandberg 2005, 56). The researcher can try to reduce this discrepancy between the words and actions of the research objects. Sandberg mentions four possible ways to do this. The first is to ask follow-up questions in interviews. By doing this the answers of the interviewees can be placed in practical situations. I used this in my research by regularly asking follow-up questions in the interviews. I did this by asking what the interviewee exactly meant or by asking the interviewee to give an example of what he or she said. A second possibility that Sandberg mentions is to give an interpretation of the words of the interviewee and see how he or she responds to this interpretation. I did this in the interviews by regularly filling in myself what the interviewee could mean: "Do you mean that...?". A third possibility is what Sandberg calls participant observation, in which the researcher himself looks at the practice the research object speaks about. I did this by not only interviewing the members of the Task Force and the Leading Group, but also attending the meetings of these groups. A fourth possibility Sandberg mentions is to apply, and thereby test, in practice the interpretations that come from the research. This requires a sequel research. I did not use this possibility, because it would have required an additional study. In the way I performed my research, I tried in different ways to test to what extent and in what way the words of my research objects also matched their actions in the Leading Group or Task Force. This contributed to the pragmatic validity of my research.

The third type of validity Sandberg mentions is transgressive validity. While communicative and pragmatic validity aimed to search for coherence, the purpose of transgressive validity is to pay attention to the "various forms of ambiguity, complexity, and multiplicity in the lived experience

investigated. [...] Its primary aim is to help researchers to become aware of their taken-for-granted frameworks "(Sandberg 2005, 57-58). For achieving transgressive validity Sandberg also distinguishes three ways. The first is the use of irony to interrupt and disturb the researcher's usual way of thinking. In my research I use the term irony, albeit in a more specific manner. Earlier in this chapter I introduced Rorty's concept of the ironic scholar. This is the scholar who is aware of his own contingency. This ironic attitude of the researcher also contributes to Sandberg's transgressive validity. The ironic researcher is constantly aware of the fact that his usual way of thinking is contingent and that therefore there are other possible ways of looking at the lived experience he is examining. My attitude in this research is also that of an ironic researcher, especially in the ongoing reflection on my own role in the research. The second way Sandberg mentions for achieving transgressive validity is the search for differences and contradictions, instead of searching for consistency. According to Sandberg, instead of focusing on research results that confirm each other, the researcher should rather look for results that are different or even opposite. This forces the researcher to take a critical stand against his research objects and not automatically apply his usual way of thinking. In my research I made this looking for differences to an explicit part of my method. In chapter 4 I describe the method of analytic bracketing that I use. In chapter 5 and 6 I describe, using this method, the municipalities that I have examined from two different, in a sense even opposing perspectives. I let these two stories stand side by side instead of combining them in one story. I do this to give space to different interpretations and to focus not immediately on finding a coherent whole. This contributes to the transgressive validity of my research. The fact that I have done my research in two municipalities also contributes to the transgressive validity of my research. I come back to this in section 4.2. The third way Sandberg finally mentions in order to contribute to the transgressive validity of research is to acknowledge the differences between the male and the female lived experience. This can be done by making sure that among the research objects there are men as well as women. In my research this is the case, because both the Leading Group in Dryland as the Task Force in Highwater consisted of both men and women. However, I have not specifically addressed the differences in lived experience between men and women. I did pay attention to other differences between the research objects, such as the group of people or the organization they represented.

My research answers in several respects to the requirements of communicative, pragmatic and transgressive validity as Sandberg (2005) describes them. As mentioned, this is a very different validity as applied in positivist research. But corresponding to the nature of interpretative research my research can yet still be considered as meeting the requirements of validity.

#### 2.4.4 Reliability through transparency and reflexivity

Like the concept of validity, the term reliability cannot easily be applied to interpretative research. Here as well there must be made a translation from the common meaning of the term in positivist

research to a useful meaning in interpretive research. The concept of reliability is described by Sandberg (2005) from an interpretative approach as "interpretive awareness". The attitude of the researcher is very important here. Reliability is about "the procedure for achieving truthful interpretations" (Sandberg 2005, 58). I summarize Sandberg's description of reliability with my concepts of transparency and reflexivity.

Academic research requires a transparent attitude of the researcher. As mentioned, it is impossible for the researcher to take a neutral, objective position against his research objects. He is always involved in and part of what he examines. He is both subject and object of research. The research is therefore always personal and depends on the person of the researcher. Some other researcher cannot simply 'repeat' the research. This means that the researcher should be as transparent as possible about how he has performed his research. In the words of Sandberg:

*"Researchers must demonstrate how they have dealt with their intentional relation to the lived experience studied. That is, researchers must demonstrate how they have controlled and checked their interpretations throughout the research process "*

Sandberg 2005, 59

Only referring to a common method or procedure is not sufficient. The way the researcher used this method is in fact always very personal again. Here also, the researcher must be transparent. The audience must be able to see what the researcher has done. The steps that the researcher has taken, but also the search process that he has gone through. Each research is a quest. I started this book with the assertion that my research has been a search process. I then described how I came to the subject of my research and how my quest through the academic literature has evolved. For the audience, it is important to be able to follow this process. Academic research is always a complicated process, and this should also be recognizable in the description of the research. An academic text can be logical and easily legible, this is even what the principle of consistency requires, but the search of the researcher to achieve the end result should also be visible. The end result of the research is not all that matters, but the process that led to that end result is at least equally interesting.

In this book I have been as transparent as possible, by describing my search for the subject of my research and my quest through the academic literature. For the sake of consistency I have structured this somewhat, which has led to the chaptering as I explained above. But it should be clear that this quest has evolved less structured. In the following chapters I also try to be as transparent as possible, especially when it comes to my empirical research. In chapter 4 I describe extensively what I have done in my empirical research. Although I use widely known and applied methods, I apply them in my own particular manner. About this, and also about my considerations to do things in a certain way, I try to be as transparent as possible to my audience.

Another concept that is important for the reliability of my research is reflexivity. This also has to do with the role of the researcher. The researcher is himself part of the research he performs and describes. This means that he has a complex role. He looks at his research objects, but also has to look at his own role. After all, if the researcher wants to give a complete picture of the research he does, he should also reflect on his own role. Or, according to Sandberg, the researcher must "acknowledge and explicitly deal with [his] subjectivity throughout the research process instead of overlooking it." The researcher must be "aware of how [his] own interpretations are influenced by the particular disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological perspectives taken in the study" (Sandberg 2005, 59). Reflection on the researcher's own role is important, especially because it is not a natural attitude. The researcher is not always naturally aware of his own role. This requires special attention and sometimes even consciously thinking about it.

In my research I try to respect this principle of reflexivity as well. In this book I regularly reflect on my own role as a researcher. I have done this in this section, by specifically addressing what my role as a researcher means for the way I describe my research. In the concrete description of my empirical research, in which the mixing of my role as a researcher (and thus part of the research) and describer is most apparent, I address a separate section to a reflection on my own role. By doing this I show to my audience how I have performed my research and how my person and my personal interpretation have influenced my research.

#### 2.4.5      *Phenomenological epoché as a strategy for achieving validity and reliability*

In addition to a description of the concepts of validity and reliability from the perspective of interpretative research, Sandberg (2005) also introduces another term: phenomenological epoché. This concept describes the necessary attitude of the researcher and is according to Sandberg a strategy for achieving validity and reliability. Epoché is about delaying (bracketing) the researcher's judgment, in order to give as much space as possible to the lived experience that is studied to speak for itself. In the words of Sandberg, the purpose of epoché is:

*"to ensure that the researcher withholds his or her theories and prejudices when interpreting lived experience. [...] Researchers should strive to retain themselves from routinely applying their known theories and prejudices to be maximally open to the lived experience under investigation"*

Sandberg 2005, 60

Sandberg describes five steps with which the researcher can practice this attitude of epoché. First, the researcher should be focused on how the research object appears to him during the research. He should approach the research object as openly as possible and let his theory or method influence his observations as little as possible. Second, the researcher should be focused on describing the lived experience that he studies and not on explaining why the lived experience is as

it is. A third step is horizontalization. This means that the researcher should treat all aspects of the lived experience that he studies as equally important. He must not in advance, from his theory or method, consider some aspects as more important than others. The fourth step Sandberg describes says that the researcher should be looking for certain "structural features, or the basic meaning structure, of the experience under investigation" (Sandberg 2005, 61). And the final step is the use of "intentionality as a correlational rule" (Sandberg 2005, 61). This means that the researcher should first look at what the research objects experience as their reality. He then looks at how the research objects experience this reality as such. Only then should the researcher attempt to integrate these two aspects: how the research objects experience their reality and what they experience as their reality. This shows again the reluctant attitude of the researcher, who arrives at his research results by following clearly distinguished phases.

The attitude Sandberg describes as epoché and which he sees as a strategy to achieve validity and reliability, I also tried to have in my research. Above I have already given some examples of how I tried to meet the requirements of validity and reliability, and in section 4.3 I will describe these more concretely. But in the attitude that I tried to adopt as a researcher I have always been cautious about drawing conclusions. I tried to bring into play the lived experience in the two municipalities that I have researched as much as possible. I can give two examples of this. In my description of the municipalities I let the two stories I tell about the municipalities stand next to each other as long as possible. Moreover, the descriptions of the municipalities contain many quotes and fragments that come directly from the interviews, documents or records of the meetings. By doing this I try to stay as close as possible to the lived experience of my research objects. A second example is the last chapter of this book. Although I bring together some lines from my research in this chapter, I am reluctant in drawing conclusions. In my view, drawing conclusions is difficult considering the type of research that I do and would not quite fit with epoché. I consider the last chapter of this book rather as a final reflection. I give my interpretations and reflect on my research. I also make a connection between the different stories of the municipalities. But the character of this final chapter remains provisional, from my attitude of epoché.

## ***2.5 Knowledge is power?***

The question that remains is what knowledge is all about, based on the contingency thinking that I outlined in this chapter. Another question is what power has to do with it. In Chapter 1 I mentioned the concept of power, stressing the importance Foucault attaches to the concept of power and his view on it. What is the relationship between knowledge and power?

A famous saying goes 'knowledge is power'. Foucault seems to underline this saying with his characterization of discourse as 'power/knowledge'. Yet it is good to see what this actually means. The phrase "knowledge is power" often assumes a concept of knowledge that comes from, in Rorty's terms, (see section 2.1) a 'metaphysical' worldview. Knowledge as knowing objective facts about 'the' reality. Here knowledge is something that an individual can "own": someone has more or less knowledge about a particular subject, which means that he knows more or less facts. The phrase "knowledge is power" in this context means that someone who knows more facts about a particular subject, has power over someone who knows less facts. The person with more factual knowledge is indeed closer to 'the' truth about that particular topic. He knows 'the facts' and can give the other person with less knowledge instructions in this regard, teach him or even reprimand him. Knowledge in this case has indeed an interactive character, in the sense that knowledge is shared and that people learn from each other. But in the end, knowledge is linked to an individual who has the knowledge and thus has a certain power over others.

In my view, in line with Foucault, the term 'knowledge is power' has a distinctly different meaning. Knowledge is not something an individual 'owns'. Knowledge is discursive, as is clear from Foucault's characterization of discourse as 'power/knowledge'. Discourse is an interactive phenomenon, something that exists between people. People take part in discourses, but never hold on to a discourse, let alone that they can 'own' it. Within the discourse meaning is given to reality, as I stated in chapter 1. A discourse is formed by people, is constantly evolving through the contribution of people, but the discourse also has a great influence on the people who participate in the discourse. Indeed, the discourse expresses the reality of these people. In section 1.5 I therefore emphasized that power is reflected within discourse. Power cannot be obtained or possessed by individuals, but 'happens' within a discourse. The same applies to knowledge. Knowledge is never owned by individuals, but is created within the discourse. Within a discourse people give meaning to a part of reality, and thereby create knowledge about this part of reality. Within the discourse this knowledge exists, but outside of it this knowledge can be completely meaningless and therefore worthless. The link between knowledge and power should also be considered within this context. The meaning that is present or formed within a discourse provides a shared knowledge within that discourse. This shared knowledge determines the reality of the participants in the discourse, this is the power of the discourse. But the knowledge and power that exist within the discourse only exist within the boundaries of this discourse. In another discourse the knowledge can be worthless, meaningless and the influence or power of it can be completely gone.

Applied to this research, the question is what knowledge of the economic crisis in this research entails. In the municipalities that I studied there is knowledge about the economic crisis, formed within the discourses of the groups that I have followed. These groups make sense of the reality

around them. Meanings from other, broader discourses play a role here (for example, from politics or the media, but also from discourses in which the different members of the groups participate, like discourses of the group of local entrepreneurs or discourses of educational groups). But the groups themselves constructed their own meaning from these other meanings, which produces knowledge about the economic crisis within the discourse of the group. This knowledge 'is' power, because it determines within the group what the group is going to do: what activities they will undertake, what activities they will spend their money on, et cetera. Burawoy (1998) stresses the importance of power for, as he calls it, reflexive science. According to him, effects of power form the greatest limitations to reflexive science. This has to do with the fact that in reflexive science, the researcher "intervenes in the world [he] seeks to grasp, destabilizing [his] own analysis" (Burawoy 1998, 22).

As a researcher, I try to 'get to know' the discourses that exist in the groups that I have examined. I do this by describing the discourses, by reconstructing them in my own vocabulary. This is what I do in this book. What I write is in itself no knowledge or power. It only becomes knowledge when it starts playing a role in the discourses of the different groups that I've previously mentioned as my audiences. Once this book becomes part of the academic or practice discourse in which I participate, then it is, as part of this discourse, knowledge. And then also, through the discourse, power is exercised. This also means that this book is not 'finished' as soon as it is written. In itself it is then still meaningless. The book only becomes meaningful when it is read by my audience and when it becomes part of the discourses of this audience. The content of a text is in itself meaningless, unless it is read by an audience and plays a role in discourses of this audience. The style of the text is important here: the text must be "distinctive and persuasive" (Kilduff & Mehra 2007, 465). Only when the text is read and plays a role in discourses, it contributes to knowledge creation. Only then also, partly through the text, power is exercised in the discourse.





### 3 Look who's talking

In the first two chapters I explained my ontology and epistemology. A term that regularly returned in these chapters was 'discourse'. In this chapter, I elaborate on this notion of discourse. I describe my methodology, which is built around discourse analysis. In the first section of this chapter I describe this discourse analysis. In section 3.2 I discuss a known issue that plays an important role in my empirical research: the structure-agency issue.

#### **3.1 Discourse analysis**

In discourse analysis research is done around the concept of 'discourse'. In this research I use discourse analysis, but from a specific angle. Discourse analysis is in fact no well-defined methodology, but includes a wide range of approaches and methods. In this paragraph I position myself within this range. Without pretending to be complete I describe some different approaches to discourse analysis, in order to make my position clear. I start with the question what a discourse exactly is.

##### 3.1.1 What is a discourse?

The concept of discourse, as well as discourse analysis, is used in many different ways. Bos (2007) describes in his book, that aims to give an overview of these different uses, the term discourse as

<i>"the set of meaningful spoken and written expressions, recognized within a social community, plus the ways in which these expressions are established, and the ways in which they are understood."</i>
---

Bos 2007, 16

This definition has four parts, which show the scope of the concept.

First, discourse is described as a set of meaningful spoken and written expressions. In a discourse meaning is given to a particular phenomenon. This is done by means of a set of linguistic expressions. In Bos' definition these expressions can be spoken or written, but often this definition is used in an even broader sense. Written expressions are then not just letters and words, but also images, icons, artworks, buildings and other 'artifacts' (Phillips et al. 2004, 636). These are all examples of linguistic expressions, or texts, which together can form a discourse. The connection between these texts is that they jointly construct a meaning of a certain phenomenon. These texts together construct a way of speaking about the topic.

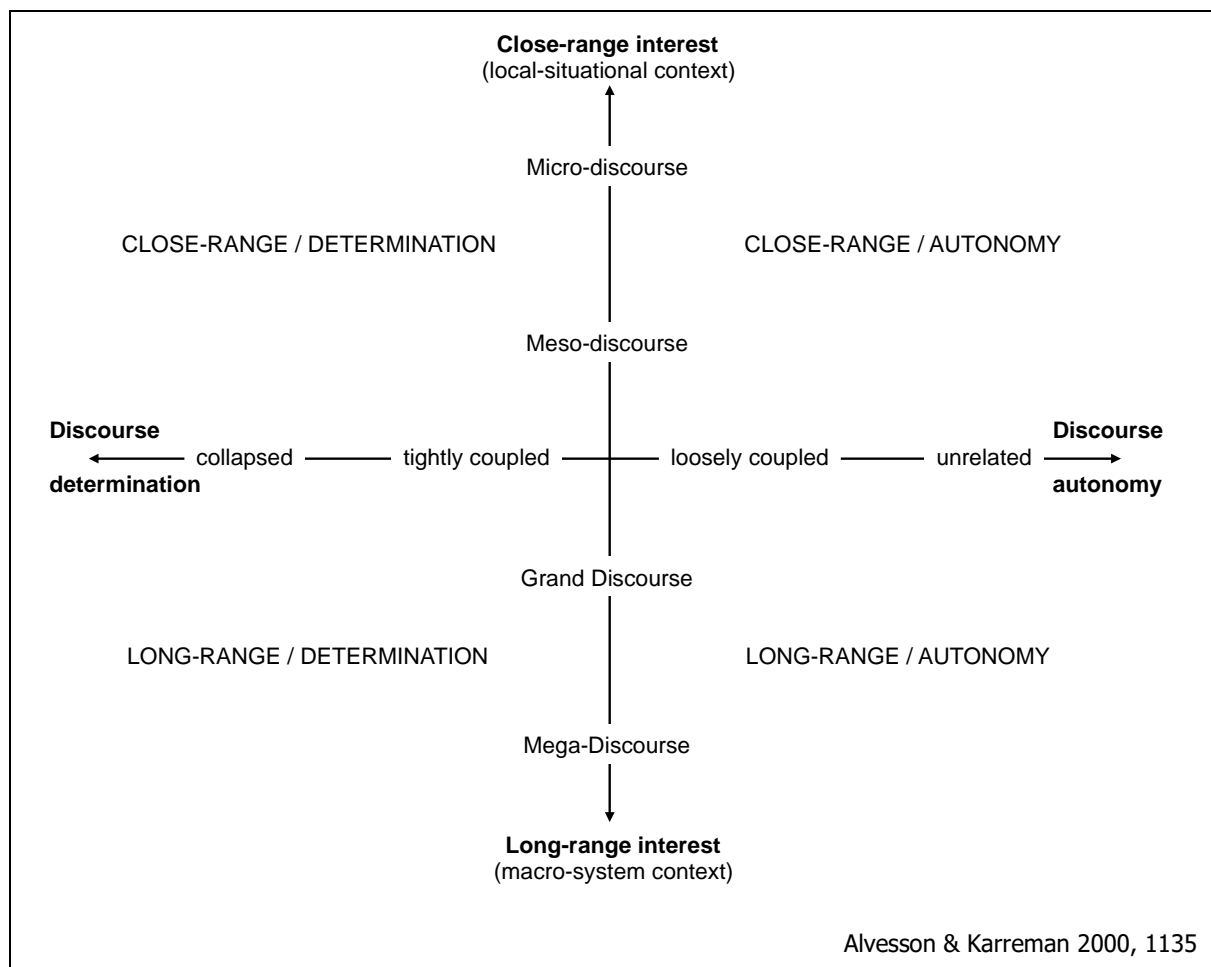
Second, Bos' definition mentions the context in which the discourse happens: it is recognized within a social community. A discourse is by definition something that takes place at the level of a group of people. This group can be small, from two people who together give meaning to something that they experience together, but it can also be at a national or international level, for example, 'the capitalist world' or 'the West' (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000, 1133 et seq.).

Third, discourse is about the ways in which the set of expressions is constructed. In the first two elements of Bos' definition the notion of discourse is still described as a static concept. In the third and fourth elements, the dynamic character of discourse is emphasized. Looking at the ways in which the set of expressions is established stresses that a discourse is not fixed but evolving. This third element of Bos' definition indicates that human behavior affects the formation of discourses. The various expressions that together form the discourse are in fact uttered by individuals, who hereby each contribute to the construction of the set of meaningful expressions that together constitute the discourse.

Fourth, discourse is also about the way the expressions are understood. This fourth element also emphasizes the dynamic nature of discourse, but from a different perspective than the third element. While in the third element individuals influenced the development of the discourse, in the fourth element the discourse influences the behavior of these same individuals. Between these third and fourth elements there is an interaction. Although a discourse is created by human expressions, and therefore is a human construct, it is never 'possessed' or 'controlled' by people. The discourse also affects human behavior again, by being the frame of reference within which people act and give meaning to reality. This interaction touches on an issue that frequently recurs in various forms and that I discuss in the next section: the structure-agency issue.

### 3.1.2 Different positions within discourse analysis

The four elements of Bos' definition show the different aspects of the concept of discourse. This does not mean that the concept of discourse is interpreted and used in many different ways. Alvesson & Kärreman (2000) provide an overview of different forms of discourse analysis. They distinguish four possible positions within the spectrum of discourse analysis, based on two dimensions. The figure below shows these two dimensions and the resulting four positions.



### 3.1.2.1. Discourse autonomy or discourse determination?

The first axis in the model of Alvesson & Karreman is about the relationship between discourse and meaning and goes from discourse determination to discourse autonomy.

The one extreme, discourse autonomy, implies that "discourse and meaning [are] (almost) uncoupled - except from highly limited and temporal effects of discourse on meaning, fading away with the next moment of language use" (1131). From this perspective discourses can be studied in isolation from other social phenomena, such as knowledge, power, culture, et cetera. Discourses exist from this perspective independent of the process of sensemaking. What goes on in the mind, beliefs, emotions and opinions, cannot be derived from the discourses in which people participate. Discourses are seen as forms of communication between people, but the role of discourse in the social construction of reality is not recognized here.

The other extreme of this axis is what Alvesson & Karreman call discourse determination. From this perspective, discourse and meaning are inseparable. Meaning is discursively constructed in this perspective. Knowledge, feelings, thoughts, et cetera do not exist apart from discourses. In all social actions of people discourses play a crucial role, even in the construction of subjectivity. This perspective on discourse determination is also the position of poststructuralism and of Foucault. It

also reflects my position. I do not consider discourses as 'just' communication between people, but as linguistic structures that play a central role in the sensemaking of reality. Discourses give meaning to reality and construct even the subjects participating in the discourses. My choice is clearly for the left extreme of discourse determination.

#### 3.1.2.2. Close-range interest or long-range interest?

The second dimension in the model of Alvesson & Kärreman is about the scope of the discourse, or the interpersonal level at which the discourse evolves. This dimension ranges from close-range interest, or the local situational context, to long-range interest, or the macro-system context.

One extreme, close-range interest, is about types of discourse analysis focusing on local discourses. In these types of discourse analysis, the emphasis is on the specific context of the discourse and the unique process of establishment and development of the discourse.

At the other extreme are the types of discourse analysis with a long-range interest. These studies examine discourses that exist on a macro level. These are discourses about a particular subject that can be seen as more or less universal. To distinguish between the types of close-range interest and the types of long-range interest, Alvesson & Kärreman (2000, 1133) call the first category 'discourses' and the second 'Discourses'. On this dimension, they distinguish a total of four main categories:

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| "(1) | <i>micro-discourse approach – social texts, calling for the detailed study of language use in a specific micro-context;</i>   |
| (2)  | <i>meso-discourse approach – being relatively sensitive to language use in context but interest in finding broader patterns and going beyond the details of the text and generalizing to similar local contexts;</i>  |
| (3)  | <i>Grand Discourse approach – an assembly of discourses, ordered and presented as an integrated frame. A Grand Discourse may refer to/constitute organizational reality, for example dominating language use about corporate culture or ideology;</i>   |
| (4)  | <i>Mega-Discourse approach – an idea of a more or less universal connection of discourse material. Mega-Discourse typically addresses more or less standardized ways of referring to/constituting a certain type of phenomenon, e.g. business re-engineering, diversity or globalization"</i> |

Alvesson & Kärreman 2000, 1133-1134

Both extremes on this dimension have their pros and cons. A micro-discourse approach has the major advantage that more attention is paid to the context of the discourse and that the smallest details of the discourse are observed. This means that in such research more detailed information about the discourse can be given. The disadvantage is that the focus of the research is so much on the local context that the research can only say anything about that specific context. A micro-discourse research is so focused on the specific details of a particular discourse, that no broader patterns are recognized.

The pros and cons of a Mega-Discourse approach are in fact exactly the opposite. The advantage of a Mega-Discourse approach is that it looks at broader patterns that apply in a broader context. This increases the potential audience for which the research has relevance. The disadvantage of the Mega-Discourse approach is that there is less attention to detail and the specific context of a local discourse. Differences between discourses are often overlooked and resemblances are emphasized.

Every researcher in discourse analysis has to choose what the focus of his research should be. According to Hajer (2006), this is not so much a choice that is linked to the researcher's convictions about discourse analysis in general, but much more a pragmatic choice linked to the aim and character of the specific research:

*"What detail of analysis does one need? Discourse analysts present a wide range of answers to this question. While Foucault still is the unrivalled master of the sweeping statements over periods of hundred years or more, others argue for an extremely detailed analysis, suggesting that the data set can only be very limited and the researchable questions should be confined likewise. How you do operationalize discourse analysis, of course depends very much on the type of questions you have. In many cases however the opposition between detail and relevance is a false one. It is, after all, a matter of research design."*

Hajer 2006, 68

Alvesson & Kärreman (2000) mention some examples of studies that fit within one of the four categories they distinguish. They also mention some examples of researchers who are trying to combine different categories in the same study. However, according to Alvesson & Kärreman the combination of a micro and a macro approach in one research leads to problems.

*"We think that there is a tension between these two levels. Investigations of the local construction of discourse treat discourse as an emergent and locally constructed phenomenon, while the study of Discourses usually starts from well established a priori understandings of the phenomenon in question. It is not easy, we believe, to accurately account for both in the same study. This should not, however, discourage such efforts. Rigour should sometimes be downplayed for the benefit of social relevance"*

Alvesson & Kärreman 2000, 1134

At this point I do not agree with Alvesson & Kärreman. I recognize that there is a tension between the various forms of research. This tension, indicated by Alvesson & Kärreman as the tension between micro and macro, I describe in section 3.2 extensively as the structure-agency issue. Indeed, many studies can be classified in either the structure / macro or the agency / micro side. However, it might be interesting to look for synthesis in this tension, as was done in sociology by authors like Giddens and Bourdieu (Jacobs 1993 Vandenberghe 1993, Giddens 1984). Also other authors (e.g. Torfing 1999) stress the importance to connect the structure and agency perspective

with each other. In my research I combine both perspectives, by using the method of analytic bracketing. In chapter 4 I describe this method in more detail.

### 3.1.3 Discourse according to Foucault

The various types of discourse analysis often refer to Michel Foucault. He is very influential in the thinking about discourse and the use of discourse analysis, but his ideas are also interpreted in many different ways. I also consider my ideas as connected to Foucault and I explain below how I interpret him and how I let myself be inspired by his ideas.

#### 3.1.3.1. Power/Knowledge

Michel Foucault uses, as I mentioned before, the term 'power/knowledge' as he talks about discourse. This description contains two elements that are important for Foucault: the relationship of discourse with knowledge and the relationship of discourse with power. Both I already discussed in the previous chapters. Both knowledge and power can never be possessed by people, an individual cannot have knowledge or exercise power. This always happens through discourse. Knowledge is created within a discursive context and power is exercised through discourse. Discourse for Foucault is a central concept and it is right that Alvesson & Kärreman (2000) place him on the side of their 'discourse determination' (see above). Discourse and meaning are closely related, in fact, meaning can only exist within discourse. In other words, meaning is discursive. Reality also only becomes meaningful within discourse. Foucault shows this with his archaeological method, in which he looks at the development of discourses in time. He demonstrates how meanings (discourses) that are obvious to us, modern people, are in fact historically formed. Interesting is what Foucault says about man, in his famous quote from *The order of things*:

*"As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end."*

Foucault 2002, 422

This quote about man as a recent invention and the 'death of man' has caused much comment. But in fact it is a consequence of Foucault's thinking about discourse. The idea of the 'death of man' has a double meaning. The first meaning is the 'unmasking' of man as a discursively formed idea. This means that man, or the subject, is not a fixed reality. Man is discursively shaped, just like the socially constructed reality around it. The second meaning is a further consequence of the first. Man, or the human subject, is slowly disappearing as the center of reality. In the last few centuries man placed himself in the center of reality (man as a recent invention), but Foucault shows that man is shaped by the discursive reality in which he lives. The attention therefore shifts more and more to the role of discourse, of the system. Man as the center of reality disappears, is about to die. Hence the second meaning of Foucault's announcement of the 'death of man'. Slavoj Žižek describes Foucault's position on this point in the following quote:

*"In 'post-structuralism', the subject is usually reduced to so-called subjectivation, he is conceived as an effect of a fundamentally non-subjective process: the subject is always caught in, traversed by the pre-subjective process (of 'writing', of 'desire' and so on), and the emphasis is on the individuals' different modes of 'experiencing', 'living' their positions as 'subjects', 'actors', 'agents' of the historical process. For example, only at a certain point in European history did the author of works of art, a painter or a writer, begin to see himself as a creative individual who, in his work, gives expression to his interior subjective richness. The great master of such analysis was, of course, Foucault: one might say that the main point of his late work was to articulate the different modes by which individuals assume their subject-positions."*

Žižek 2008, 197

Žižek calls Foucault here a post-structuralist. Foucault has often been labeled in different ways by others, not only as a post-structuralist but also as a structuralist and as a postmodernist. He himself never wanted to tie himself so explicitly to a particular label. Yet indeed his ideas have many similarities with the post-structuralism. Post-structuralism, like structuralism, claims that reality is dominated by structures. These are systems of meaning that are very influential in social reality, in the interaction between people. These structures construct our reality. Poststructuralism takes however one step further by arguing that these structures are not fixed but are constructed and subject to change. Foucault uses the term discourse for these structures, showing hereby that these great discourses have a discursive character, and therefore are subject to change. In Rorty's terms, see chapter 2, one can say that our reality is contingent, but according to the post-structuralists also the large determining structures are ultimately contingent.

Žižek points in the above quote that Foucault claims that even man, the subject, is constructed by discourses. The way man looks at himself is discursively determined. The image of modern man, as standing in the center of reality, is discursively determined. The idea of man that he is free to think and act is an illusion, because even this idea itself is determined by the discourse in which the modern man participates.

With this digression about the place of man, the subject, in the thinking of Foucault, the aspect of power in Foucault's notion of discourse becomes clear. I already referred to this in section 1.5, with references to Torfing (1999) and Powers (2007). They both show how power is exercised within discourse. People have no power, which makes sense in line with what I said above about the discursive character of the subject. Discourses have great power, because they determine reality. There is another important issue when it comes to the role of power in Foucault's discourse as power/knowledge. Foucault claims not only that power is exercised through discourses, but he also gives a critical analysis of this. That is, he 'exposes' existing power as being contingent. He points out that it is not obvious that in our reality there are certain power structures, but that these power structures are discursively formed. In the next section I will come back to this critical element in Foucault's thinking. First I compare Foucault's ideas to those of two other thinkers. Both

thinkers show to a large extent an analogy with Foucault, but they also clearly differ from him at certain aspects. By showing these differences the image of Foucault is further sharpened. The thinkers I place next to Foucault are Slavoj Žižek and Richard Rorty.

#### 3.1.3.2. Foucault versus Žižek

Slavoj Žižek (Žižek 2008) is a philosopher who has great affinity with Foucault. Both thinkers see reality as socially constructed. Both have a critical attitude towards the 'established order', and both do so mainly from a political leftist background. The language of Žižek and Foucault, however, is somewhat different, as well as the nuances in their thinking. Whereas in Foucault's thinking the notion of 'discourse' is central, Žižek uses the term 'ideology'. Both concepts seem very similar. Žižek's ideology is also a socially constructed set of meanings. But Žižek builds strongly on the ideas of Marx, Hegel, Freud and Lacan. The difference between Foucault and Žižek is described clearly by Vighi & Feldner (2007). In their article they compare Žižek's ideology critique with Foucault's discourse analysis.

Žižek's main criticism of Foucault is that for him absolutely everything has a discursive character. This is what Žižek also mentioned in the quote above on post-structuralism and Foucault. Even the subject is discursively constructed. For Foucault there are no fixed, given structures and also man has no fixed or given identity or kernel. Here Foucault differs from Žižek. Žižek insists on a 'real kernel' behind or in the depths of constructed reality. This also gives him an anchor point from which he formulates his ideology critique. If everything is discursive, for Žižek this makes it impossible to criticize discursive reality, because one is inevitably subject to this discursive reality oneself. One is always a product of this discursive reality. Žižek therefore holds on to a 'real kernel', which is an anchor point for him. Foucault indeed goes one step further on this point. His critical theory is not based on a fixed anchor point to which he measures the power of discourses, but on deconstructing discourses by looking at the historical context from which the discourses originated. With his archaeological and genealogical method Foucault looks at discourses and demonstrates how they originated contingently. They originated not from absolute truths or objective facts, but from historical and contextual 'coincidences'. Therefore, Foucault's critique is focused on demonstrating the contingency of discourses, not on proposing a different (better) discourse.

In my research I follow Foucault instead of Žižek, because I do not aim to take a normative standpoint regarding my research objects. My aim is to demonstrate the discursive character of the groups I have been studying.

#### 3.1.3.3. Foucault versus Rorty

In chapter 2 I already discussed Richard Rorty in detail. Rorty (2008a) compares himself to Foucault by calling him an ironist. Foucault, according to Rorty, like himself, starts from the



premise that our language is contingent. Foucault describes the emergence and development of discourses mainly from a historic perspective. Through his genealogical method, he emphasizes the contingency of our language. After all, he stresses that discourses are not constructed from universal truths but from historical (accidental) events that influence the development of the discourse.

Yet there is a clear difference between Rorty and Foucault. Although both start from the contingency of our language, they proceed in different ways. Rorty (2008a) in *Contingency, irony and solidarity* defends liberalism. He does not do this because liberalism objectively provides the best organization of society, since that is impossible according to his contingency thinking. Liberalism is simply part of the vocabulary with which he is 'raised'. It belongs to his vocabulary and from his pragmatism he chooses to defend it. Foucault chooses a different approach. He has a much more critical attitude toward his own vocabulary. Whereas Rorty confirms the discourses that have shaped him and in which he participates and attempts to contribute to their development, Foucault approaches his discourses in a much more critical way. He does this by addressing the restrictive and oppressive elements in the discourses he studies. Foucault stresses the power aspect in discourses. Each discourse exerts power over people. Because reality is described in a specific way, power is exercised over the people who are affected by and participate in the discourse. Their view of reality is influenced by the discourse, and also their idea of their own place in this reality.

In my research I follow Foucault on this aspect. Rorty's individual and pragmatic approach is different than my approach. I do not have the ambition to defend some discourse, in the way Rorty defends the liberal discourse in which he is raised. My research is more in line with Foucault's critical and reflexive approach. I want to take a critical approach to the discourses I study, by showing their contingent and discursive character.

#### 3.1.4 A critical approach

In the above discussion of Foucault's concept of discourse his critical attitude is clearly present. I follow Foucault on this point and explain below what this means for me and how I apply this to my empirical research.

##### 3.1.4.1. Foucault's critical approach

I just contrasted Foucault's ideas with those of Žižek and Rorty. The main differences between these thinkers and Foucault focused on the critical aspect of Foucault's discourse analysis. The way in which they differ from him, however, varies for both thinkers.

Žižek believes that to be critical a fixed anchor point is needed. He sees in or behind discursive reality a 'real kernel', in which he wants to anchor his criticism. He criticizes Foucault for calling

everything discursive and therefore having no anchor point for his critical attitude. Rorty in a sense agrees with Žižek's criticism. For a similar reason he chooses to take no critical attitude. Rorty, as well as Foucault, considers everything as contingent and therefore chooses to join the 'discourse' (Rorty speaks of vocabulary) in which he was raised. In his case this is the discourse of liberalism. From this discourse he advocates the spread of liberalism, even though he is aware of the contingency of the liberal discourse.

Foucault chooses nevertheless to be critical. Foucault criticizes existing discourses by showing their contingency. However, he proposes no alternative discourse, because he realizes that this is meaningless because that alternative discourse would again be contingent. His critical attitude is limited to demonstrating the contingency of existing discourses, by showing that they also could have evolved differently. He specifically focuses on those discourses through which much power is exercised. This power often stems from the idea people have that the discourse articulates a fixed or universal truth. Precisely this idea is what Foucault intends to criticize with his critical method.

In my research I follow Foucault in this respect. I approach the discourses that I study in a critical manner, that is, I look at the power components in these discourses. I watch how the discourses are created, how they affect the people who participate in it and how the behavior of these people is influenced by the discourses. I look at how they are constrained by the discourses in their freedom of choice, because the discourses force them in a particular direction and put them in a certain position. It is precisely this critical approach that has value to me, because it puts seemingly obvious behavior in a different perspective by stressing the influence on this behavior by determining structures: the power of discourse.

#### 3.1.4.2. A critical approach of the economic crisis

Earlier in this book (in section 1.6) I already described the economic crisis as a discourse. I do not consider the economic crisis as something factual, or a combination of different objective facts, but as a discursively constructed set of meanings. People have been trying to make sense of the reality around them and used the term 'economic crisis' to do this. In my research I therefore approach the economic crisis in this way. In my empirical research that I describe in chapters 5 and 6 I use discourse analysis to reconstruct the discourse of the economic crisis, or rather to deconstruct it (a term introduced by Jacques Derrida, see Doorman & Pott 2005, 289-302). I hereby follow Foucault's perspective, in the sense that I look at the power aspect within these discourses. I watch how broader discourses about the economic crisis (see Žižek's example in section 1.6.1) affect the local situation, but also the role of power in local discourses. From the awareness of my own role as a researcher, and especially my own contingency, I propose no alternative discourse (how things 'should' have been done otherwise or even better). However, I point at the role of power in the discourses. By using this method, I undermine the obviousness that can surround a particular discourse. Pointing at the contingency of discourses lessens the obviousness of it. It also

clearly shows the power that emanates from the discourse. This is what I attempt to do in my research. The way I do this is by looking at the discourses from different perspectives. I already mentioned the power that emanates from broader discourses and the power that plays within local discourses. This touches on the structure-agency issue. This issue, and the role it plays in my research, I describe in the next section.

### **3.2 The structure-agency issue**

The structure-agency issue is a well-known and much debated issue in philosophy and social sciences. It touches on various aspects that I discussed in this book so far. In this section, I describe the issue more extensively and show what role it plays in my research.

#### **3.2.1 Structure-agency in different forms**

As mentioned, the structure-agency issue is a well-known and much debated issue. It appears in many different forms and manifestations. Below I will discuss some of these manifestations, especially from authors I already mentioned elsewhere in this book. I will apply these different manifestations on my own research and on the relationship with the economic crisis.

##### **3.2.1.1. Bos**

The structure-agency issue describes a tension between two approaches to (social) reality and the role of human behavior. In this issue discourse plays an important role. Earlier in this chapter I briefly touched the issue in my discussion of Bos' definition of discourse. This definition was: a discourse is:

<i>"the set of meaningful spoken and written expressions, recognized within a social community, plus the ways in which these expressions are established, and the ways in which they are understood"</i>
--

Bos 2007, 16

The structure-agency issue appears in the third and fourth elements of this definition. The third element, the ways in which a discourse is established, articulates the agency approach. Here the emphasis is on human behavior that is shaping the discourse, the influence of human behavior on the discourse. The fourth element of Bos' definition, the ways in which the discourse is understood, relates to the structure approach. Here the focus is on the impact of the discourse on human behavior, so the ways in which the behavior of the people participating in the discourse is influenced by the existing discourse.

These two approaches, the agency perspective and the structure perspective, and in particular the relationship between the two, are subject of a well-known debate in social sciences. At first glance the two perspectives seem to be opposites. The direction of the influencing is opposite in both

perspectives: either the human behavior of individuals affects the discourses in which these people participate, or the existing discourses influence the human behavior of the individuals who participate in them. The tension between these two directions of influence is central to the structure-agency issue. Often both perspectives are combined. Then it is assumed that the influencing takes place in both directions. This is also the case with Bos, who combines both perspectives in his definition of discourse. The discussion in the structure-agency issue is therefore often primarily concerned with the relationship between the two influencing directions.

### 3.2.1.2. Hajer

Maarten Hajer also refers to the structure and agency perspective in his writings on discourse analysis. Hajer uses a definition of discourse, in which the structure and agency perspective are both mentioned:

*"Discourse is here defined as an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices."*

Hajer 2006, 67

This definition has a similar structure as the definition by Bos described above. It starts with a static part, where discourse is described as "an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories". But then the definition also contains a dynamic part, when the relationship between discourse and practice is explained. It is in this dynamic part where the structure and agency perspective are referred to.

First Hajer says that discourse is *produced* through practices. Here it is human agency that influences discourse. In fact, discourse can only exist through human agency, because it is produced through it. This is the agency perspective on discourse.

But second, Hajer also says that discourse is *reproduced* through human agency. This implies that human agency does not start from nothing. It reproduces something that is already there, namely the discourse. The word 'reproduces' thus implies that discourse influences human agency. This is the structure perspective.

In this definition Hajer only very briefly touches on the structure-agency issue. In the next quotation, he is a little more concrete about the role of discourse analysis. He speaks here of ADA, which stands for Argumentative Discourse Analysis:

*"The real challenge for ADA is to find ways of combining analysis of the discursive production of reality with analysis of the socio-political practices from which social constructs emerge and in which actors are engaged."*

Hajer 2002, 62

A similar quotation, with a slightly different description of the issue:

*"The analysis of discursive constructions such as narratives, story lines or metaphors is especially powerful when done in the context of the study of the social-historical conditions in which the statements were produced and received. Discourse analysis then opens up methodologically sound ways to combine the analysis of the discursive production of meaning with the analysis of the socio-political practices from which social constructs emerge and in which the actors that make these statements engage."*

Hajer 2006, 67

In these quotation Hajer also mentions the structure and agency perspective.

The agency perspective is described as "the discursive production of reality" or "the discursive production of meaning". Here the word "production" stresses the influence of human agency on discourse. Discourse, in which the "meaning" of "reality" is described, is "produced" through human agency in a "discursive" process.

The structure perspective is also mentioned in similar terms. It stresses the influence of discourse on agency, when Hajer describes "the socio-political practices from which social constructs emerge and in which actors are engaged" or "engage".

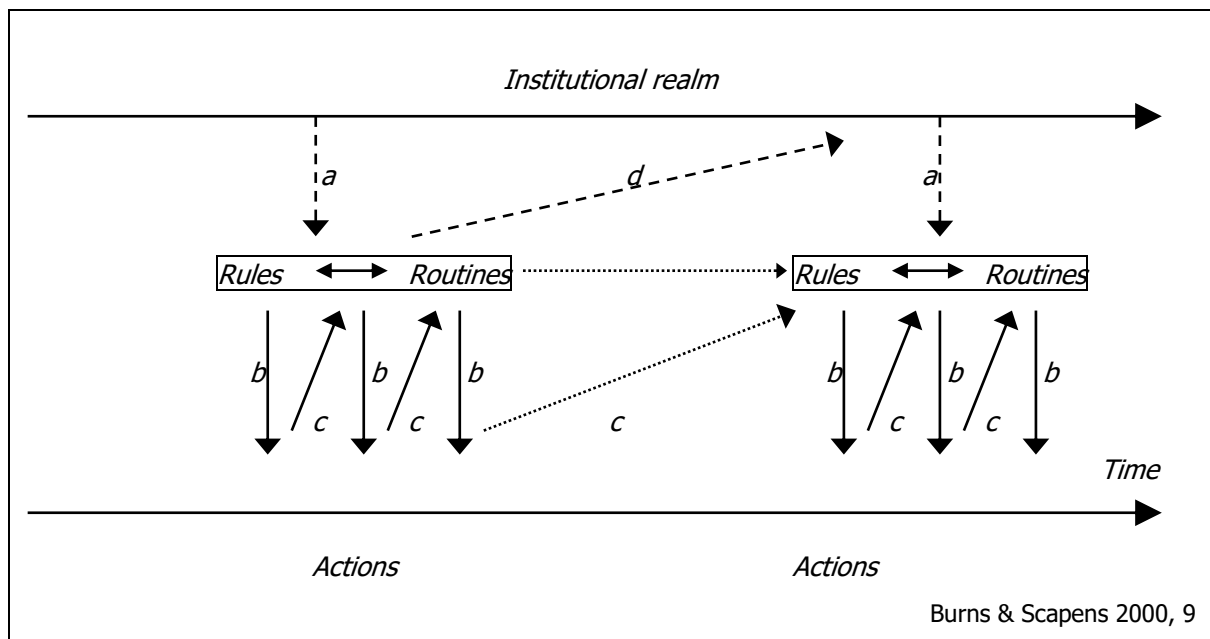
In the latter two quotations Hajer does not only describe the structure-agency issue, but he also mentions how he sees the role of discourse analysis in dealing with it. I will come back to this role in the next chapter, but it is interesting to see that Hajer says that discourse analysis should combine analysis of the agency perspective with analysis of the structure perspective.

### 3.2.1.3. Sensemaking and institutionalism

The structure-agency issue is also discussed by different authors who write about sensemaking and institutions. Related notions as sensegiving, path-dependency and path-creation show how different authors take their position in this issue.

Karl Weick (1995) describes in his book *Sensemaking in organizations* the concept of sensemaking as the creation of "reality as an ongoing accomplishment that takes form when people make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves" (Weick 1995, 15). His ideas clearly fit within social constructionism. Related to the structure-agency issue Weick's focus is on the agency perspective: people actively give meaning to the world around them. The influence of structures in this sensemaking process plays for Weick a minor role. In another article (Weick et al. 2005) he discusses the relationship between sensemaking and institutional theory and advocates a "juxtaposition of sensemaking and institutionalism" (Weick et al. 2005, 417) in research. Interesting, however, is Weick's expectation of the outcome of this juxtaposition of two concepts: "the use of corporate sensemaking vocabularies tends to be triggered by institutions, but institutions have less influence over what happens subsequent to triggering" (Weick et al., 2005, 417).

In institutional theory, the emphasis is often more on the structure perspective. The starting point is, after all, the institution, or the existing 'structure'. This does not mean that from an institutional angle the interaction of institutions with human behavior (agency) is not recognized. Examples of this include Seo and Creed (2002), who discuss the "relative swing between agency and embeddedness" (222) and Barley and Tolbert (1997), who talk about the connections between actions and institutions. Also Burns & Scapens (2000) discuss the interplay between institutions (structures) and behavior (agency). Their figure I already cited in section 1.3.2.



Yet the focus of many institutionalists remains primarily on the institution. This is also implied in the figure of Burns & Scapens, which shows that their movement starts from the 'institutional realm' to 'actions' (arrows a and b), and only then shows the counter-movement (arrows c and d).

There are also authors who try to find a balance between the primary agency approach in sensemaking and the primary structure approach in institutionalism. Sometimes they introduce new concepts to do this. Maitlis (2005) and Maitlis & Lawrence (2007), whom I already mentioned in section 1.5.1, use the term sensegiving. Besides the power element that they introduce with this term, which I already discussed in section 1.5.1, they refine the concept of sensemaking as well. With their concept of sensegiving they emphasize that the process of sensemaking, mainly focused on the agency perspective, is also affected by existing meanings. Other people can influence the sensemaking process with their already constructed meanings. This is what Maitlis (2005) and Maitlis & Lawrence (2007) call sensegiving. Their aim is to bring the theory of sensemaking a little more from the agency-side of the structure-agency issue to a balance between the two perspectives. Another concept that fulfills a similar function is 'path dependency' that is used for

example by Modell et al. (2007). Their starting point, however, lies at the other end of the spectrum, namely at institutional theory. The critique Modell et al. have on institutionalism, and they point amongst others to the article by Burns & Scapens (2000), is that too much emphasis is placed on the institutions that frame human action. They introduce the concept of path-dependency, with which they want to stress that people are indeed free to choose the 'path' they are going, only that their choice is constrained by past choices they have made earlier on their 'path'. "Rather than conceptualizing the constraining role of institutions as a set of relatively fixed, habituated or taken-for-granted action patterns, it directs our attention to the process of institutionalization as a series of interdependent choices exercised at specific, critical junctures" (Modell et al. 2007, 456).

#### 3.2.1.4. Structurism as a connection between structure and agency in sociology

The structure-agency issue is also one of the major issues in sociology. Although sometimes in different terminology, this issue has led to two separate movements within sociology during most of the twentieth century. Vandenberghe (1993) traces these two movements back to two of the greatest early sociologists: Emile Durkheim and Max Weber.

*"The durkheimian sociology represents the ideal-typical prototype of the objectivist approach. From the outside perspective (perspective of the third person) society appears as a quasi-natural universe of social facts and laws that determines the actors from the outside, behind their backs, Marx would say. In the subjectivistic approach on the other hand, of which the Weberian sociology is an example, society appears as a result of a plurality of intentional and meaningful actions which can only be interpreted from an inside perspective (perspective of the first and the second person)."*

Vandenberghe 1993, 321 (own translation)

In this quote, the objectivist approach clearly represents what I call the structure perspective and the subjectivist approach represents what I call the agency perspective. These movements in sociology have coexisted for most of the twentieth century, and authors chose for one of the two competing approaches. Adherents of both approaches often disqualified the other approach. However, sometimes there were also attempts to see both approaches in conjunction. A well-known example of this is Berger & Luckmann (1966).

Berger & Luckmann (1966) describe in their book *The social construction of reality* their view on the development of institutions by social construction. Their book has been very influential in social constructionism. Berger & Luckmann show how institutions originate. They start their argument with individual human behavior. In the interaction between individuals, meanings are constructed. These meanings become shared meanings in the group to which the individuals belong. Within this group, the shared meanings become permanent, which means that the members of the group do not question them. They are considered as given and taken for granted. At this stage, one can

speak of institutions. These institutions can exist at the level of small groups, but also at the level of larger groups, for example a nation (the culture of a country).

These institutions therefore originate from human interaction (the agency perspective), but become entities with their own dynamics. They help people to structure their lives. They offer people a frame of reference that is not in question. Because of these institutions people do not always have to think about everything, some things are simply 'given' or 'natural'. Other things, such as new phenomena that occur, must fit within the existing framework of the group. If this is not the case, then the institutional framework must be revised. This means that things that were always 'given' and 'natural' can suddenly no longer be so obvious. This is confusing for people and they will try to avoid this as much as possible. This means that people are inclined to explain new phenomena as much as possible within the existing framework, within the existing institutions. Only if there is no other option, one is willing to revise the existing framework. This means that institutions, although they are constructions originated from individual behavior, can have a large impact on how people look at reality. Institutions offer people a structure from which they make sense of the world around them. This is the other side of the structure-agency issue: the structure-perspective. Both sides coexist for Berger & Luckmann.

Later in the twentieth century, from about the 1970s - '80s, sociologists tried to find more of a synthesis between the objectivist and subjectivist, between the macro and the micro-sociology, between the structure and the agency perspective (Jacobs 1993). As an attempt to such a synthesis several authors developed what is now commonly known as structurism. The two main representatives of structurism are Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu (Jacobs 1993 and Vandenberghe 1993). The way structurism tries to arrive at a synthesis of structure and agency is to describe social structures both as a condition for human actions and as a result of it. In Burawoy's words: "studying the everyday world from the standpoint of its structuration, that is by regarding it as simultaneously shaped by and shaping an external field of forces" (Burawoy 1998, 15). Social structures frame the actions of individuals, but are also maintained or reproduced by these human actions. Vandenberghe (1993) illustrates this as follows:

*"People do not marry to reproduce the kernel family and do not work to sustain the capitalist economy, but that is nevertheless the unintended consequence of their activity and the necessary but unrecognized condition of it. So social structures not only restrict actions, let alone that they only determine them, but they also make them possible. As such, they are functionally analogous to grammatical rules."*

Vandenberghe 1993, 322 (own translation)

In this quote, the human activities of marriage and work are manifestations of the social structures of the "kernel family" and the "capitalist economy". So human action is defined and made possible by these structures. But on the other hand, these structures of "kernel family" and "capitalist



economy" are also reproduced and maintained by the concrete actions of people. This synthesis that structurism tries to achieve is developed by Giddens and Bourdieu each in their own way.

Giddens (1984) starts with actors who are capable for action and knowledgeable. "Capability for action is the ability 'to make a difference', the ability to do things so that something happens in the world, things that would not have occurred if the actor had not performed a certain action. 'Knowledgeability' means that the actors have a certain knowledge which they can rely on, to do what they want/need to do" (Jacobs 1993, 341, own translation). These properties Giddens emphasizes in response to the objectivist sociology, in which human action is determined by the social structures within which it takes place. According to Giddens actors do have their own knowledge and skills on which they base their actions. Yet Giddens also does not deny the role of structures. On the one hand structures are created by the actions of people and also constantly reproduced by the actions of people. Without these reproductive acts structures would cease to exist, so in this sense human action is a condition for the existence of structures. But on the other hand, the actions of people always take place within and in line with these structures. People are not just free to do anything in their actions. The structures in which they live provide frameworks within which actors act. Giddens stresses in this way the connection between structure and agency. He talks about the duality of structure: "According to the notion of the duality of structure, the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize" (Giddens 1984, 25). Structure and agency are hereby inextricably linked.

Bourdieu uses other terms to articulate his ideas about the relationship between structure and agency. But he also tries to connect both perspectives and can be seen as a representative of structurism. An important concept for Bourdieu is 'habitus'. This is "a system of dispositions, subconscious schemas that form the basis of thought, perception and action. It has been acquired primarily in the family, secundarily amongst others through the educational and professional environment" (Jacobs 1993, 339, own translation). The habitus is formed by the actions of people: parents, teachers and others shape someone's habitus. From the agency perspective, it can be said that the habitus is the sum of individual acts of people. However, at the same time, the habitus has a structuring effect. The habitus provides the framework within which the individual actor acts. The actor with his own habitus stands according to Bourdieu in a broader 'field'. This is the broader social environment in which the actor lives. "A field is a relatively autonomous space, built around specific positions and institutions, characterized by its own internal logic" (Jacobs 1993, 339, own translation). Within such a field the actor lives, and his 'success' in this field is determined by the extent to which his habitus allows him to act in accordance with the rules of the field. Finally, Bourdieu also speaks of the term 'capital'. This stands for the potential that an individual actor has to live in the field. Bourdieu distinguishes three types of capital (Jacobs 1993): economic capital (income), cultural capital (education and culture) and social capital (relationships and connections).

The extent to which a person owns a combination of these forms of capital, determines the class to which he belongs. Bourdieu distinguishes clearly different classes in society. The 'distinction' between these classes is widely recognized and accepted and also affects the actions of the actors within these classes. Within the class someone is also brought up in the habitus that is appropriate to the class and so one acts in accordance with the class to which one belongs. "Through the habitus one 'chooses' that for which one is 'predestined' according to the position taken in the social structure" (Jacobs 1993, 340, own translation).

With their structurism both Giddens and Bourdieu attempt to demonstrate the inseparability of structure and agency. This attempt at synthesis has led to much assent, although the responses also show how difficult it is to come to an actual synthesis. Giddens, for example, has also been regularly accused of falling back into a subjectivist or voluntarist vision (Jacobs 1993 and Vandenberghe 1993).

#### 3.2.1.5. Structuralism and post-structuralism

A last appearance of the structure-agency issue that I want to mention comes from philosophy. It is connected to the philosophical movement of structuralism (not to be confused with structurism) and its counterpart, or continuation, post-structuralism. I mentioned these movements briefly in section 3.1.3.1, where I discussed Foucault's notion of discourse. Interestingly, Foucault is considered both a structuralist and a post-structuralist. This also shows how closely these movements are connected to each other (and also how Foucault is interpreted in many different ways). The difference between the two is described by Torfing:

*"[P]ost-structuralism puts into question the traditional notion of closed and centred structures [...]. Social interaction occurs within a context of sedimented structures; however, since these structures lack a privileged centre and do not totalize and exhaust the field of identity, they are constantly changed by the articulations they make possible but fail to master. Post-structuralism thus emphasizes the instability and contingency of the structural context of social interaction. [...] The overall impact of post-structuralism has thus been the destabilization of all pre-given, self-enclosed unities, be they structures, signs or scientific discourses."*

Torfing 1999, 54-55

According to structuralism human action is determined by fixed structures that exist in our society. Foucault's discourses can be seen as such structures. Although people think they can make free choices about their actions, they are in fact tied to the structures within which they live. The discourses in which they participate determine their vocabulary. This is clearly the structure perspective of the structure-agency issue. Poststructuralism responds to structuralism. Not by denying that these structures exist, but by pointing out that these structures are unstable. Post-structuralism deconstructs the seemingly solid structures that exist in our society, by pointing out that they are contingent and socially constructed. Foucault is therefore also considered by many to

be a post-structuralist, because he demonstrates the discursive character of the great discourses in society with his archaeological and genealogical method. Foucault characterizes these large discourses as "historically and culturally located systems of power/knowledge" (Holstein & Gubrium 2005, 490). Although post-structuralism thus still recognizes the impact of structures, it moves in the spectrum of the structure-agency issue more in the direction of the agency-side, by pointing out that all structures are constructed through contingent behavior (agency). Or, in Foucault's words, discourses are historically and culturally located.

Hajer, whom I mentioned before, also refers to post-structuralism in his writings about discourse analysis:

*"Discourse Analysis tracks the way that people position one another through language use or the way that they are positioned through widely employed discourses. Of course, people can also quite literally be framed by discourse, but the post-structuralist orientation of discourse analysis here comes out in the presumption that this always happens through the (re)creation of particular relationships."*

Hajer 2002, 63

Here Hajer mentions the "widely employed discourses" that structure the actions of people, but also the fact that these structures are 'created' and 'recreated' in "particular relationships". This nuance of the functioning of structures is what post-structuralism adds to the somehow one-sided approach of structuralism. In another article Hajer describes it as follows:

*"the poststructuralist background of a discourse-analytical approach comes out in the fact that it does not assume coherent and concerted political action. Politics is better understood in terms of the various practices of 'micro-power': many, often seemingly trivial, mechanisms that influenced the way in which a certain phenomenon is interpreted so as to make it manageable for the structures of society. A discourse analysis would try and find these mechanisms, and would attempt to show how they together can produce certain effects."*

Hajer 2006, 69

Hajer makes here also a reference to the role of discourse analysis as a research method. Discourse analysis should try to find the mechanisms that help to bridge human agency and societal structures.

Torring (1999) elaborates in his book on the structure-agency issue. He even devotes a whole chapter to it (Torring 1999, 137-154). According to Torring agency refers to "an intentionally acting subject", while structure is about "the complex and relatively enduring relationships that define the basic properties of the system and permit its continued reproduction" (137). Torring describes the tension between the structure and the agency perspective as follows:

*"Most social, cultural and political phenomena are explainable both in terms of their structural determinants and in terms of the social actions that brought them about"*

Torring 1999, 137

The interesting point is that Torring quite explicitly mentions both sides of the issue, similar to the sociological attempt of structurism to arrive at a synthesis. Torring takes no position, but stresses that both perspectives have their value. This is different from many other authors, also many of the authors I discussed in this section. They still often take their own position somewhere in the spectrum of structure and agency. Torring shows that both perspectives can stand next to each other and even be complementary. This way of dealing with the structure-agency issue is also what I intend to do in my research. Before showing how I do this in my research, I translate the structure-agency issue to the subject of my research: the economic crisis.

### 3.2.2     *The structure-agency issue and the economic crisis*

The structure-agency issue is also present in relation to the economic crisis. To conclude this methodological chapter, I show how one can look at the economic crisis from these two perspectives.

#### 3.2.2.1.     *A structure-perspective on the economic crisis*

From a structure-perspective the discourse of the economic crisis affects people's actions. The discourse of the economic crisis is from this perspective a broad discourse that plays on an even international level. In terms of Alvesson & Kärreman (2000, 1133-1134) it can be seen as a "Mega-Discourse". The economic crisis is discussed much in (international) politics, in the (international) media, et cetera. One can say there is a broad discourse on the economic crisis. This broad discourse affects the people who participate in the discourse to a large extent. Many people 'believe' in the economic crisis as a matter of fact and let their behavior be influenced by it. For example, people worry about the future, set some extra money aside for the future, postpone major expenses, et cetera.

In my research, in which I look specifically at the level of two groups within Dutch municipalities, this structure perspective will show similar phenomena. The people in these groups will also be influenced by the larger discourse of the economic crisis. Already the emergence of these groups has been a response to this broader discourse. From a structural perspective, I will look to what extent the behavior of the people in these groups is influenced by the broader discourse of the economic crisis. My expectation is that this influence is great, because people's behavior in general is strongly influenced by existing structures, institutions and discourses. I argued this in the previous chapters in different terms, based on different authors. In the description of my empirical

research in chapters 5 and 6, I will show how the structures of the broad discourse of the economic crisis affects the behavior of the people in the groups that I examined.

#### 3.2.2.2. An agency-perspective on the economic crisis

From an agency-perspective, the discourse of the economic crisis is constructed by human behavior. People gave meaning to phenomena around them and hereby constructed the discourse of the economic crisis. Even now that the discourse exists, it is still influenced and shaped by the actions of individuals, in interaction with each other. Because people discuss how worrying the financial situation is and how they are worried about the future, they will be more careful with spending money, they will save more and postpone large financial expenses. This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, as Weick describes it: "self-fulfilling prophecies are the prototype for human sensemaking. People create and find what they expect to find" (Weick 1995, 35).

In the groups I study, I look from an agency-perspective at how the actions of the members affect the discourses within these groups. My expectation is that I will see examples of concrete actions of people, or ways of speaking about the crisis that they bring into the group, that then will affect how the group as a whole will speak about the economic crisis. Perhaps I will also see examples of how the discourses as they develop within the specific groups, will affect broader local discourses. In chapters 5 and 6 I will discuss the groups in my research from this agency-perspective.



## 4 Two tales of a city

In the previous chapter I described my methodology. I discussed in some detail what discourse analysis is and what different forms of it can be distinguished. I described my own position, amongst others by comparing the positions of Foucault, Žižek and Rorty. I also discussed the structure-agency issue in the previous chapter.

In this chapter, I make the translation to my empirical research. The structure-agency issue plays an important role in this. In the previous chapter I described the structure-agency issue but not yet concretely how I deal with this issue. I do this in the first part of this chapter, when I introduce the method of analytic bracketing. In the second part of this chapter I describe how I performed my research, using the method of analytic bracketing. I describe how I selected the two municipalities and what concrete actions I did during my empirical research. I conclude this chapter with a section on my role as a researcher, in line with what I said about reflexivity in section 2.5.

### 4.1 *Analytic bracketing*

In chapter 3 I introduced the structure-agency issue. I showed how the perspectives of structure and agency are two different approaches within discourse analysis. However, at the same time they are two sides of the same coin that cannot exist without each other. I quoted Torfing (1999) who said:

*"Most social, cultural and political phenomena are explainable both in terms of their structural determinants and in terms of the social actions that brought them about"*

Torfing 1999, 137

In my research I use both perspectives. I will now explain how I do this, based on the method of analytic bracketing.

#### 4.1.1 *Analytic bracketing as a 'solution' for the structure-agency issue*

Holstein and Gubrium (2005) describe the structure-agency issue in their own words. They use the distinction between the 'hows' and 'whats' of social reality:

*"how people methodically construct their experiences and their worlds, and [...] the configurations of meaning and institutional life that inform and shape their reality-constructing activity"*

Holstein & Gubrium 2005, 484

The 'hows' represent the agency perspective: the way people make sense of their experiences and hereby construct reality around them. The 'whats' refer to the structure-perspective: the existing structures that influence people's actions. More in terms of discourse analysis Holstein & Gubrium use the terms 'discursive practice' and 'discourse-in-practice'. Here 'discursive practice' refers to the agency-perspective, namely how practice is established in a discursive way. 'Discourse-in-practice' is about the structure-perspective, namely the existing discourses that are applied in practice. Holstein & Gubrium (2005) argue that the tension between micro and macro, sensemaking and institutions, structure and agency, how and what, or discursive practice and discourse-in-practice should not be solved.

*"Rather than attempting synthesis or integration, we view an analytics of interpretive practice as more like a skilled juggling act, alternately concentrating on the myriad hows and whats of everyday life. This requires a new form of bracketing to capture the interplay between discursive practice and discourse-in-practice. We've called this technique of oscillating indifference to the realities of everyday life "analytic bracketing"."*

Holstein & Gubrium 2005, 495-496

I choose, following Holstein & Gubrium, to use the method of analytic bracketing to 'solve' the structure-agency issue. The temptation to choose between the two perspectives of the structure-agency issue may be large. Alvesson & Kärreman (2000) in fact argue for such a choice, when they advise not to combine the two extremes of their dimension that runs from close-range interest (similar to the agency-perspective) to long-range interest (similar to the structure-perspective), as I have shown in section 3.1.2. However, I believe that Holstein and Gubrium are right when they say that the structure- and agency-perspective belong together. Opting for one of the two perspectives within a research makes it by definition one-legged. Holstein & Gubrium agree with Alvesson & Kärreman that combining both perspectives is difficult. They quote Maynard, which makes a comparison between analytic bracketing and:

*"wanting to ride trains that are going in different directions, initially hopping on one and then somehow jumping on the other [...] How do you jump from one train to another when they are going in different directions?"*

Holstein & Gubrium 2005, 497

But despite the practical complexity combining the structure- and agency-perspective still seems to be the best way to respect the coherence and reciprocity of both.

In practice analytic bracketing demands that the researcher constantly changes perspective. The moment one studies a local discourse that is constructed in a local context within a small group of people, one should immediately also look at how this local process of sensemaking is affected, structured or framed by a broader existing discourse. Also vice versa, if one examines how an



existing broader discourse influences or structures social reality in a local context, such as an organization, then one should also look immediately at how the process of sensemaking within this organization affects the broader discourse and contributes to the construction of new meanings. It should be clear that this way of doing research demands much from the researcher. In the next section I will discuss this in more detail.

#### 4.1.2 Examples from other studies

I explained in general what the method of analytic bracketing entails. Before describing how I apply this method myself, I discuss in this section some examples of studies in which analytic bracketing is applied (Åkerström 2006, Crawley & Broad 2004, Persson & Wästerfors 2009). Although these studies are about completely different topics, the way they apply the method of analytic bracketing is still relevant to my research.

Åkerström (2006) studied the reactions on policy changes of juvenile center staff members. He used three types of data collection: a questionnaire, observation and unstructured, tape-recorded interviews. Åkerström hereby refers to the method of analytic bracketing as he describes how:

*"this empirical analysis begins by considering the 'conditions of interpretation' within which policy innovations involving the ideology of family-work are implemented in a Swedish human service organization. This involves a description pertinent to discourses-in-practice as well as the settings, social organization, notions of professionalism, and typifications of youngsters and parents that characterize the local scene (the whats). It then turns to discursive practice, analyzing how juvenile center staff members 'do ambivalence' in relation to new social policy. The practice of doing ambivalence is divided into practices of embracing family-work and staff members distancing practices, or the ways they resist policy innovation."*

Åkerström 2006, 59

Åkerström makes an interesting comment about the different types of data collection that he used. He studied how staff members of the organization responded to policy innovations. His conclusion was that there was a certain ambivalence in these reactions. Staff members adapted their behavior partly to the new policy, but also showed resistance and doubts. Åkerström says about this:

*"There were, however, some differences between the types of material: discursive acceptance was elaborated more in the questionnaire, which can be viewed as demanding more accountable knowledge [...], while reservations were aired mainly during interviews and observations."*

Åkerström 2006, 61

This is interesting because it seems to suggest that people are more aware of what they say in questionnaires than they are in interviews. They may give more socially desirable answers or

answers they can argue. Thoughts or feelings for which they have no clear arguments may be expressed easier in interviews or informal meetings than in questionnaires.

Crawley & Broad (2004) studied how people told their biographies in the context of social activism. They looked at how panels of LGBT-people (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) spoke before school classes or organizations. Their data collection consisted of various types of observations. They observed some panels without having a specific role themselves, but they also participated in some panels or were teachers in a class that was visited by a panel. In all these situations, they observed what happened and they made (if possible) notes. Afterwards, as soon as possible after the observations themselves, they worked out their notes in detail. Crawley & Broad refer explicitly to Gubrium & Holstein's method of analytic bracketing:

*"Gubrium and Holstein suggested that always within the constraints of the auspices of interaction, people use specific strategies (the hows) to convey intended messages (the whats). Using analytic bracketing, a researcher alternatively moves attention back and forth from the hows to the whats to create a picture of the setting that is attentive to both the substance of the discussion and the strategies used to convey meaning. We used this analytic strategy to be sure that we noted recurrent substantive themes that panelists conveyed through their stories (the whats) and the strategies they employed to convey these meanings (the hows)."*

Crawley & Broad 2004, 46

Persson & Wästerfors (2009) studied how employees in nursing homes justify that residents of nursing homes often have less influence on the organization than social norms and national policy require. They used qualitative in-depth interviews with employees to collect their data. For the analysis of these interviews they used analytic bracketing:

*"'Bracketing' the 'how's' at the start allowed us to examine the range of actions staff members described by which they restricted the influence of the elderly residents, such as showering a resident against his or her will or restricting a resident's influence on how to arrange furniture in his or her room. The analysis of the various 'whats' in this study also included staff members' descriptions of what the residents complained about: complaints with regard to food that was difficult to chew, a pillow that was placed incorrectly in bed or simply complaints about the lack of company. After the initial focus on the 'whats,' we continued to return to the same issues but this time analytically bracketed the 'whats' and focused on how the staff accounted for actions to restrict the influence of the elderly residents. Thus, questions about the ways in which a story was told (the 'how's') were asked in relation to questions about its content (the 'whats'), as these factors were equally important in understanding how staff members explained potentially questionable behavior"*

Persson & Wästerfors 2009, 3

These examples show that the method analytic bracketing allows various forms of data collection. I used in my research several forms of the ones mentioned above. I had interviews with some members of the groups I studied. I tape-recorded these interviews, which I later transcribed

literally. I also attended meetings. During these meetings, I made notes, which I worked out right afterwards. Finally, I also studied documents that had to do with the groups that I studied. These were mainly official reports of meetings, notes, and articles about these groups. In section 4.3 I will describe these different forms of data collection more extensively.

#### 4.1.3     Two stories

In my research a major focus has been to combine the structure and agency perspective. Analytic bracketing means looking both at the discursive practice and at the discourse-in-practice. I did this in the analysis of my research data (see the next section for the method of data collection). On the one hand, I looked at how local discourses evolved within the groups that I studied. On the other hand, I looked at how local discourses within these groups were influenced by existing broader discourses. This leads to a story about these groups from two different perspectives. Or perhaps it is even better to talk about two different stories about the same municipality. After all, the same text, the same quotation, the same phenomenon can often be interpreted both from the agency perspective and from the structure perspective. This raises the question of how I deal with these two stories in the description of my empirical research, in the next two chapters. I considered two options.

The first option would be to combine the two stories that emerged during the analysis, by the ever-changing perspective, into one story. In this story I could still show the changing of perspectives, but ultimately it would be one story about my research in this municipality. This is also what usually happened in the studies to which I referred in the previous section. Ultimately, the studies provide one analysis, one story. A disadvantage of this first option is that the sharp distinction between the two perspectives soon becomes less clear to the reader. There is also the risk that the story becomes some weaker mean of the two perspectives.

The second option would be to keep the two stories that emerged during the analysis separated, also in the ultimate description of the research. This would mean that there are two stories for each municipality: one from the structure perspective and one from the agency perspective. This avoids the disadvantages of the first option. The distinction between the two perspectives remains intact and both perspectives are clear to the reader, because the whole story is told from the same perspective. For this reason I chose for this second option. This is not a very obvious choice, and also not a very common one, but it is a choice that fits within my vision of research as I described it in the first chapters of this book. The choice to tell two stories about each municipality stresses once again the contingent nature of this research. I do not suggest that the story I tell about the municipality is 'the' story, but I show that it is influenced by many factors, in this case specifically by the perspective from which I analyzed the municipality.

This way the question of how the structure and agency perspective are related, remains open till the final part of my analysis. It is only at the end of each chapter that I do reflect on both stories, after I told the two separate stories. I hereby reflect on my role as a researcher, but I also give some considerations about the relationship between the two perspectives. In chapter 7 I also reflect at the process of my research and the choices I made along the way.

#### 4.1.4     Power

In the way I deal with the structure and agency perspective the aspect of power also plays a role. In my description of the two perspectives I took the critical role as Foucault described it: pointing out the power aspect that, although often invisible at first glance, plays a role in and through discourses. By stressing this power aspect and 'deconstructing' it I show its contingent nature. It shows that it could also have been different. The role of power, from the background as I outlined in the previous chapters, is a recurring theme in my empirical research and shows the aim and relevance of my research.

From the structure perspective, I look at power that is exercised in the specific groups that I studied through existing broader discourses. The aim and relevance of my research from this structure perspective is to show the influence of broader discourses, where people may think that their actions are based on their own initiatives and ideas. From a structural perspective, the emphasis is on the framing, structuring effect of existing discourses. In this case, it is specifically the existing discourse about the economic crisis that affected the groups in my research by leading to the initiation of various actions or initiatives to deal with the consequences of the economic crisis for their local municipality.

From the agency perspective, I look at power that is exercised through the development of local discourses in the groups that I studied. I look here how this discursive practice leads to certain actions of the group itself or even beyond. Here the aim and relevance of my research is to highlight the contingency of the development of local discourses. This may show how the contribution of a specific individual in the group leads to the development of the discourse in a particular direction, making the group act a certain way. Also the process of the meetings of the groups, the interaction within the groups, the texts (documents, et cetera) that are discussed, can have a strong influence on the development of the local discourse. This power aspect is what I aim to show from the agency perspective.

The role of the power aspect within my research shows that the difference between the structure and agency perspective is indeed large and important. In fact the power aspect in both perspectives is distinctly different. Power from existing structures, through discourse-in-practice, has a distinctly different character and a different effect than power from the local evolving

discourse, the discursive practice. Precisely through the juxtaposition of both perspectives in two different stories this difference becomes evident.

## **4.2 *The selection of Highwater and Dryland***

In the previous section I described on a philosophical level the method I used in my empirical research: analytic bracketing. From now on I will explain more in detail how I performed my actual research. In the next two chapters I discuss both municipalities, Highwater and Dryland, separately.

The names of these municipalities, as well as the names of the people I met in the municipalities, are anonymized. I did this because in the description of the municipalities I used confidential information, including, for example, issues discussed in the privacy of the group or personal information of participants that was entrusted to me in individual interviews. In the interviews the issue of confidentiality was sometimes specifically addressed: "Maybe you should not write this down...", "This is something you have to deal with confidentially...", et cetera. But this research cannot do without this type of information because it often gives an interesting insight into discourses and how people deal with this kind of information. The information is often discussed only in a specific context and is not intended for a different context, but precisely for that reason it is important for recognizing and understanding the discourse. This will also turn out in the description of the discourses and the quotations that I give as examples. The fact that the data are anonymized does not detract from this study. In this type of research the concept of 'reliability' is not used in a positivist sense: the same research conducted by another researcher should lead to the same result. Reliability is used more in terms of reflexivity and transparency, as I already described in chapter 2. To meet these requirements, it is not crucial to mention the names of the studied organizations and persons. They are rather met by accurately describing the steps taken in the research (transparency) and by reflecting on this (reflection).

In the remainder of this chapter I describe what I did in preparation of the actual research in both municipalities. I hereby elaborate on certain aspects of my research. This has everything to do with the principle of transparency, which I introduced in chapter 2. My research is highly individual and can not just be 'repeated' by some other researcher. This makes it even more important to explain concretely and in detail to my audience what I did in my research and what considerations I made to make certain choices. I intend to do this here, starting with the selection of the municipalities where I have done my research.

#### 4.2.1     Why two municipalities?

For my research I selected two groups within Dutch municipalities. This selection I made in the second half of 2009. I deliberately chose to involve no more than two municipalities in my research. For the type of research I do, it was not necessary to perform my research in more municipalities. After all my research was not intended to be representative for Dutch municipalities in general and to lead to general conclusions. This would have been possible from a more positivist view of research, but not from my more interpretive view. In my research the focus was more on the uniqueness of the two municipalities. I looked at that which was specific for that municipality, in the specific meetings between these specific people. For the type of research I did, it would already suffice to describe one municipality. The main point is that this description satisfies certain criteria, such as consistency, transparency, reflexivity and epoché that I described earlier.

Another reason why I did not involve more municipalities in my research is of a more practical nature. The method that I used, analytic bracketing, is quite intensive. In the next section I describe this more in detail, but conducting interviews, studying documents, attending meetings and analyzing all these research data took a lot of time. Just for practical reasons it was therefore not possible to include much more than two municipalities in my research.

Although it would have been sufficient for the type of research I do to include only one municipality, I nevertheless decided to do my research in two municipalities. This made it possible to look at parallels and differences between the two municipalities. Here I must make a clear nuance. As I said my research was not intended to make a comparison between different municipalities, let alone to come to general conclusions about Dutch municipalities and their response to the economic crisis. I therefore did no comparative research. In my research, I always kept the uniqueness of the municipalities intact. Yet this does not mean that I could not look for similarities and differences between the two groups, based on the analyses that I had. It could be that both municipalities dealt with a particular issue in a similar way or that I saw similar discourses that influenced the practices in both municipalities. Without drawing major conclusions, it could still be possible to make some interesting observations. On the other hand, it could also be that the municipalities dealt quite differently with a similar issue or that there would be very different discourses that influenced local practice. This comparison touches on the issue of validity, that I discussed in section 2.5. I hereby referred to Sandberg (2005), who distinguishes different forms of validity. The first two forms, communicative and pragmatic validity, are focused on the search for coherence within research. The third form however, transgressive validity, is aimed at finding contradictions. It helps to look at the "various forms of ambiguity, complexity, and multiplicity in the lived experience investigated. [...] Its primary aim is to help researchers to become aware of their taken-for-granted frameworks" (Sandberg 2005, 57-58). Quite the juxtaposition of two municipalities in my research helps to see the differences between the two. It prevents me from drawing conclusions too soon, based on one municipality. Indeed, showing the

differences between the two municipalities stresses the uniqueness of both municipalities relative to the other. Therefore, the juxtaposition of the two municipalities in my research is not focused on looking for general conclusions, but rather on recognizing and acknowledging the differences between them and the uniqueness of both.

#### 4.2.2      *The selection of the municipalities*

For selecting the municipalities, I first looked at the website of the Association of Dutch Municipalities (ADM, in Dutch: Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten). This website had a section with information on the economic crisis. In addition to information from the ADM itself, the website also gave an overview of what municipalities did in response to the economic crisis (called 'practical examples'). In these practical examples a brief description was given of what the municipality had done or was planning to do, a link to the website of the municipality and (if available) one or more documents the municipality had written in reaction to the economic crisis. I made a list of these municipalities. In addition, I also searched on the Internet myself for municipalities that had given a more or less official reaction to the economic crisis. These municipalities I added to my list. I ended up with a list of about twenty municipalities.

To reduce the list to three to five municipalities suitable for my research (considering that there was a chance that one or more municipalities would not want to participate in my research), I made a further selection. The list contained municipalities of different sizes. There was a relatively big number of larger municipalities. Four of the municipalities had more than 200,000 inhabitants. Another three municipalities had more than 100,000 inhabitants. I chose to leave out these larger municipalities and focus on the smaller ones. For these smaller municipalities, it seemed more special that they reacted so soon on the economic crisis. And besides, for my research method these smaller municipalities would be more suitable, because it would be easier for me to speak to the people involved. These organizations were smaller and therefore people in different parts of the organization would be more accessible for me to approach for an interview.

From the smaller municipalities I made a further selection. The reactions of these municipalities to the economic crisis seemed to be quite different from each other. Some municipalities had a document that only mentioned the potential financial impact of the crisis on their municipality. From these documents, it seemed as if there were no direct actions planned to do something about these effects. However, other municipalities had a document that looked more like a plan. These municipalities often formed a 'task force' or 'project group' that had to develop the plans from the document and to bring them into practice. The latter group of municipalities I considered as relevant for my research. First, because these municipalities seemed to have picked up the question of the impact of the crisis on their citizens more seriously. But second, because in these municipalities there already seemed to be a link between the document and concrete actions. In

other words, the link between language and actions was already made here by the municipalities themselves. Moreover, the 'task forces' or 'project groups' could be interesting starting points for my research. The documents that I had found on the Internet seemed to be important texts within the discourses of the 'task forces' or 'project groups' in these municipalities. Based on this selection I then visited two municipalities to ask if I could do research in their organizations. These were the municipalities that became the two municipalities of which I describe the stories in the next chapters: Highwater and Dryland.

#### 4.2.2.1. General information on Highwater

My research in the town of Highwater took place from the spring of 2010 until the summer of 2011. Hence this was a period of a little over one year. On 19 April 2010 I attended my first meeting of the Task Force Economic Crisis, as it was called in High Water. My last interview, with Edward, I had on 18 July 2011.

Prior to my first meeting of the Task Force, which I attended on 19 April 2010, I first had a conversation with the city manager of Highwater and with Roy, manager of the department of Urban Development. This was in response to the email I sent to the city manager on 8 February 2010, with the request to follow the Taskforce in Highwater for my research. The city manager had invited Roy to the conversation because he was the person from the municipality who was responsible for the Task Force. After I explained my research shortly, we rather quickly agreed that I would follow the Task Force for a period of approximately one year. Roy did make the remark that it was not certain at that time whether the Task Force would be maintained for the entire next year. They were orientating on the future of the group. I told them that this was not an obstacle for me to start my research at the Task Force, and we agreed that I would be invited for the next meeting.

On 11 March 2010 I sent an email reminder to Roy, asking when the next meeting of the Task Force was scheduled. He responded that it was scheduled on 22 March 2010, and referred me to George, the secretary of the Task Force, for the associated documents. The meeting of 22 March was later canceled, and the first meeting I actually attended was on 19 April 2010. This was a meeting of the entire Task Force, so with both the representatives from the municipality of Highwater and with the representatives of the other participating organizations. There were also meetings with only the representatives of the municipality. People talked about 'external' and 'internal' meetings of the Task Force. After the last meeting I attended, on 16 May 2011, Roy asked me to write down some of my findings. I did this and I explained them in a conversation with Roy, George and Neil on 12 December 2011. Roy asked me to explain these findings also at the next meeting of the Task Force, as a completion of my research in Highwater. I would receive an invitation for this next meeting. Eventually this took almost a year, and on 26 November 2012 I finally attended another meeting of the Task Force to present my findings. I hereby presented the



findings as I had prepared them for the conversation with Roy, George and Neil on 12 December 2011. These findings were quite short and practical. At that time I had not yet finished the analysis that I describe here.

The Task Force in Highwater was partly composed of representatives of the municipality and partly of representatives of other local organizations.

The representatives of the municipality were:

- Alan, alderman for Economic Affairs and chairman of the Task Force. The first meeting I attended, on 19 April 2010, was also the first meeting he attended, because after the recently held elections he had become the new alderman for Economic Affairs.
- Roy, manager of the department of Urban Development, was the person from the municipality who took the lead in the Task Force.
- Neil, policy advisor for Economic Affairs, played a key role in the preparation and elaboration of substantive issues.
- George was the secretary of the Task Force and was responsible for sending documents like the agenda and for making reports of the meetings.
- Diana, manager of Social Affairs.
- Richard, manager of Welfare.
- Simone, manager of Governance and Legal Affairs / Tender / Research.

There were also several people from the municipality, managers from departments, who always received the documents and were invited for the meetings, but who were never at the meetings that I attended.

From the 'external' organizations there was always one person from each organization represented in the Task Force. The only exception to this was the local association of entrepreneurs. This association was officially represented by two persons, but each time only one of them was present. The representatives of the 'external' organizations were:

- Graham and Howard from the local association of entrepreneurs.
- Monica from the Employee Insurance Agency (in Dutch: UWV).
- Edward from a local bank.
- Bill from the regional Chamber of Commerce.
- Sean from Bouwend Nederland, an association of construction and infrastructure companies.

During most of the meetings Jim was also present. He was a researcher from the company that composed the Trend Monitor every three months and came to the meetings of the Task Force to explain the Trend Monitor. However, officially he was not a member of the Task Force.

#### 4.2.2.2. General information on Dryland

I did my research in Dryland in the period from late 2010 until late 2011. At least this is the period that I have actually followed the Economic Leading Group, as it was called in Dryland. The first

meeting of the Leading Group that I attended was on 2 November 2010. However, prior to this date I had already met several times with people involved in this group.

On 13 January 2010 I sent an email to the city manager of Dryland, asking if I could do research in his municipality. I happened to know this city manager a little bit, because he had been a colleague of mine at BMC until quite recently. During that period I had met him two or three times. In response to my email, I had a conversation with the city manager and the manager responsible for the Economic Leading Group on 15 February 2010. The latter was Fay, who also plays a role in the descriptions in chapter 6. Fay said in this conversation that they had agreed in principle with my request to follow the Leading Group, but that she still wanted to discuss it with a few people. After this conversation it remained silent for a while, but after a few emails from my side I got a call from Ralph, a civil servant who worked for Fay and who was also involved in the Leading Group. His name also appears several times in the descriptions. On 25 June 2010 I had a conversation with Ralph, in which I briefly explained my research and in which he told me about the Leading Group. In this conversation, Ralph asked me to write down a short description of my research and my plans in Dryland, so he could put it on the agenda for the next meeting of the Leading Group. I did this, after which it remained silent again for some time. After several failed attempts to speak with Ralph on the phone, I received an email from him on 27 October 2010, addressed to all the members of the Leading Group. This email contained the invitation and agenda for the meeting of the Leading Group on 2 November 2010. My description of my research was, along with the other documents, attached and in his email Ralph shortly introduced me. After this preliminary phase my actual research in Dryland began from that point, starting with the meeting of the Leading Group on 2 November 2010.

The Economic Leading Group in Dryland was composed of representatives from different parties. From the municipality of Dryland these were:

- Michael, alderman for Economic Affairs and chairman of the Leading Group.
- John, alderman for Work & Income.
- Fay, Director of Strategy.
- Ralph, secretary of the Leading Group.

The other parties were each represented by one person:

- Iris was in the Leading Group on behalf of a local/regional institution for higher education.
- Peter represented a housing cooperative.
- Laura represented another housing cooperative.
- Harold represented a local association of employers.
- Henry represented the local SMEs.
- Ryan was in the Leading Group on behalf of a local platform of technological companies.
- Paula represented a local bank.

- James represented the Employee Insurance Agency.
- Mary was in the Leading Group on behalf of a local group of healthcare organizations.

### ***4.3 Methods used in my empirical research***

As already mentioned, I used several methods in my research. In this section I describe these methods more concretely. In chapters 5 and 6 I then describe the concrete stories of my research.

#### ***4.3.1 Studying documents***

As I already indicated, my research started with a document. In both municipalities, this was a document that can be characterized as a plan. It contained a brief analysis of the economic crisis and of its impact on the municipality, and an impetus for concrete activities to mitigate the effects of the crisis. This document was one of the first documents that I used in my research.

For both municipalities I studied additional documents. For Highwater these were mainly the documents that were sent as discussion documents for the Task Force meetings: agendas, reports and attachments to the agenda. There were also emails that were sent by members of the Task Force. Bill and Sean for example both sent an email prior to the meeting of 16 May 2011 to say that they could not make it to the meeting, but they also made a few comments. I used these emails also in my analysis. I also studied documents that were written in the first period of the Task Force, from the beginning until the moment I started to follow the Task Force. These play a smaller role in my stories of the Task Force. For these stories I mainly looked at the documents from the period that I actually followed the Task Force.

For Dryland, I studied all the documents that were distributed for the meetings of the Leading Group I attended. These were agendas and minutes of previous meetings, but also attached documents on specific agenda items. As part of the evaluation of the Leading Group that took place during this period, there were also documents that were written in an earlier period, at the start of the Leading Group.

The documents I mainly studied in relation to the way in which they were discussed in the meetings of the groups. Some documents were in fact discussed during the meetings, but other documents were sent more as background information. This also says something about the role that the documents played in the local discourses in these groups. The documents also differed from each other as to their nature. The reports of the meetings gave a brief summary of what was discussed at the meetings and in particular what was agreed. Other documents were more informative in nature and often more extensive. Sometimes the documents had a local character,

such as a vision from the municipality, sometimes they had a wider focus, for example an analysis of (statistical) data on the state of the economy at a local, regional and / or national level.

In studying the documents, I again used the two perspectives I described earlier. From the agency perspective, I looked at how the local discourse was expressed in the documents by the members of the group and how the documents played a role in the development of the discourse in the group. From a structure perspective, I looked at how existing, broader discourses were recognizably expressed in the documents and in this way had their impact on the local discourses in the group. From the three methods of data collection I used, studying documents played the smallest role in my research. The focus of my analysis was more on the meetings I have attended and the interviews I have held. Studying documents was mainly complementary to those two other methods.

#### 4.3.2     Attending meetings

I have attended the meetings of the groups to see as directly as possible what was discussed and decided in the groups and how this happened. This way I could follow how the groups functioned and who played which role. Attending meetings was also an example of what Sandberg (2005) calls 'pragmatic validity'. It was a form of participant observation, in which among other things I looked whether what the members said in the interviews also corresponded with their actions in the group. During these meetings, I was very much aware of the influence that I as a researcher could have on the meetings. Observing the process without influencing is indeed impossible: already my presence could influence what people did or did not say or give a certain status to the group in the eyes of the members (they could argue that what they did was apparently special, because it was interesting enough for a PhD research). I have always been aware of my role as a researcher, and I have therefore chosen to stay in the background as much as possible during the meetings.

In Highwater I first attended an 'external' meeting of the Task Force on 19 April 2010. After that I also attended meetings on 28 June 2010 (internal), 20 September 2010 (internal), 18 October 2010 (external), 21 February 2011 (external) and 16 May 2011 (external). These were a total of six meetings, and during this period these were also all the meetings of the Task Force.

For my research in Dryland I attended five meetings of the Economic Leading Group. The first of these was on 2 November 2010, the others were on 16 December 2010, 10 March 2011, 28 April 2011 and 11 October 2011. These were all the meetings that were held during this period. Before the start of my research in Dryland I had said that I would follow the Leading Group for a period of about a year. Therefore, I agreed with Ralph after the meeting of 11 October 2011 that this was my last meeting. At his request, I still wrote down some of my findings and explained them to him

in a conversation. These findings were rather practical, and different from those according to the analysis that I present here.

In the first meeting I attended in both municipalities, I briefly introduced myself and my research. I explained that I was studying how municipalities responded to the economic crisis and that I wanted to follow this group for a period of approximately one year. I did not discuss my methodology and did not explicitly say that I was looking at aspects such as language and behavior. This type of information could influence the members of the group even more, something I wanted to minimize. I wanted to fit in as much as possible to the 'lived experience' of the members and let them tell their own story, from the perspective of the communicative validity of my research.

During the meetings I hardly said anything, but only made notes of what was being discussed. I tried to do this as detailed as possible, to stay in my notes as close as possible to what was literally said and done, to the 'lived experience'. Afterwards I worked out my notes in a report. I hereby also wrote down observations I had made during the meetings. This could be anything I noticed: where someone had sat down, which person spoke a lot, the atmosphere during the meeting, the (underlying) tone of what someone said, et cetera. These observations I wrote down as soon as possible after the meeting, when they were still vivid to my mind. These reports were then the basis for my further analysis. In these reports, I searched for traces of discourses. First, I divided the reports in sections in which a certain topic or theme was addressed. This could be a theme like 'current status of the economic crisis' or 'aim of the Task Force / Leading Group'. Within these sections I looked for lines, quotes, et cetera that might contain traces of discourses. Because of my methodology, I did this in two separate rounds. From a structure perspective, I looked at phrases that contained references to some broader discourses. After I did this for all reports (and interview transcripts) I looked for the recurring references to broader discourses. These references were the basis for my analysis from a structure perspective as I described it in chapters 5 and 6. From an agency perspective I then used a similar approach. I also looked for lines, quotes, et cetera, but this time I focused on phrases that were about new meanings that were constructed by members of the Task Force or Leading Group. After I did this for all reports and interview transcripts I looked for the traces of discursive practice that were recurring more often. These traces were the basis for my analysis from an agency perspective as I described it in chapters 5 and 6.

Although I tried to stay as close as possible in my reporting to what was literally said and done, this was obviously not quite possible. This could have better been possible if I had made audio or video recordings of the meetings. However, I have deliberately chosen not to do so. My consideration here was between reporting as detailed as possible and to influence the process as little as possible. By making recordings of the meetings I would disrupt the process more than I did

now. People could have objections against this and / or act differently because of the recordings. Certain things might be said otherwise or even not at all. I wanted to avoid this and therefore I have refrained from making recordings. The disadvantage of this is that I have no literal quotes from the meetings, as from the interviews, of which I did make recordings. My reports of the meetings contain more interpretation than the interview reports. This is ultimately inevitable. I have nevertheless been aware of this as much as possible and tried to be as transparent as possible about it in the description of my research in this book.

#### 4.3.3     Having interviews

In Highwater I interviewed six members of the Task Force. These were four representatives of the municipality and two external members. I interviewed Roy on 14 June 2010. Unlike the other interviews I did not record this one, because my recording equipment was not functioning at that time. I did make notes that I elaborated afterwards in an interview report. From this interview I therefore do not have any direct quotes. The second interview was on 10 August 2010 with Diana. On 11 October 2011 I successively interviewed George and Neil. On 7 March 2011 I then interviewed Graham. The last interview, after the last meeting of the Task Force that I attended (apart from the last meeting in which I presented my findings), was with Edward on 18 July 2011.

In Dryland I interviewed six members of the Economic Leading Group. Here I do not consider the preliminary and concluding conversations with Fay and Ralph as interviews. These conversations had a different character and I have not analyzed them as such (I for example did not make recordings of these conversations). However, these conversations also played a role in my analysis, because Fay and Ralph gave information about the Leading Group and how they considered it. On the other hand, what I said in the conversations about my research design and afterwards about my findings undoubtedly also influenced them.

The actual interviews were on 12 January 2011 with successively Ralph (as secretary of the Leading Group) and Fay (as director from the municipality), on 24 January 2011 with Michael (as alderman and chairman of the Leading Group), on 9 March 2011 with John (alderman), on 25 August 2011 with Peter (director of one of the two housing cooperatives in the Leading Group) and on 28 November 2011 with Iris (director of an institution for higher education).

The last interview with Iris took place after I had indicated to Ralph that I would no longer attend the meetings of the Leading Group (at the meeting of 11 October 2011). It was also after the concluding conversation with Ralph in which I presented a few findings to him. Initially the interview with Iris was planned earlier, on 27 October 2011. This was also after the last meeting, but still prior to the concluding conversation with Ralph, which took place on 1 November 2011. But at the request of Iris the interview was moved to 28 November 2011.

As one can see, I first interviewed the representatives of the municipalities and then the representatives of other members of the Task Force and Leading Group. This has to do with the fact that I was initially planning to interview only representatives from the municipalities. However, I gradually adjusted the exact effectuation of these interviews. I started my empirical research with a focus on the way the municipality dealt with the impact of the economic crisis. That was also my initial intention before I selected the municipalities: look at how municipalities responded to the economic crisis. The selection of the two municipalities already showed that both municipalities in their approach opted for cooperation (within the project group) with their social partners. Then I decided to broaden the focus of my research to the question how municipalities worked together with their social partners in their response to the economic crisis. However, my perspective was initially the municipality. From this perspective I also started my empirical research. I had planned to interview about four members of the group, each of them representatives from the municipality. I wanted to choose members who might look at the functioning of the group from a different perspective, for example because of their function. I also wanted to see what they thought about the cooperation with and the input from the social partners. Because I wanted to follow the development of the discourses in the group, I had planned to interview each person twice during the process: the first interview at the beginning of my research and the second about six months later. This would therefore be a total of eight interviews. Hereby I could see how for each interviewee their images and ideas developed during the process. With this approach I started the interviews.

In November 2010 I started in the second municipality, Dryland, parallel to the first one, which was Highwater. Here my approach was initially the same: to examine the cooperation with social partners from the perspective of the municipality. In Dryland, however, this soon turned out to be not the best approach. First, because the cooperation with social partners played a much more central role in this municipality. People were much more aware of the question how they could work together in a good way. Because of this my attention was also drawn more towards this cooperation. Second, very practical, in the group from the second municipality there were relatively more social partners. In this municipality one had deliberately chosen to keep the number of representatives from the municipality limited. This evoked the question whether it would be interesting to interview some social partners as well. A third reason is less linked to this specific research. In 2010, in my work as a management consultant, I had been engaged with the issue of cooperation between municipalities and social partners. From this perspective, the issue of cooperation had aroused my interest and thought of it as an important issue for municipalities in the near future.

These three reasons led me to interview also some of the social partners in the Leading Group in Dryland, next to members from the municipality. I then chose to do likewise in the Task Force in

Highwater. This had the effect, however, that the number of interviewees came at six, and I very practically concluded that it was not possible to interview all these people twice. With researches in two municipalities that ran parallel and with the labor-intensive method I used (literally working out the recorded interviews) this was practically not possible. I therefore chose to interview six members in each municipality only once. The downside was that I could not see (by comparing the first and second interview) any developments at an individual level. The advantage was however that I was able to interview more different people and thereby introduce also the perspective of some 'external' members.

There is another important remark to be made here. Because the interviews were held throughout the research period, a comparison between the different perspectives of the interviewees is not easily possible. The possible impact of the moment of the interview on the perspective of the interviewee should be taken into account. In other words, a difference in perspective between the first and the last interviewee could be explained by differences between these individuals, but they could also be explained by the fact that both interviews were held at different moments in time (and therefore under different conditions). These factors cannot just be separated. This point is important anyway, also apart from the choice described here to interview each interviewee only once. In case of differences between the interviews there are always more factors involved than just the differences between the people that are interviewed. Each interview always takes place in a particular setting. The time of the interview plays a role, but also my role as interviewer. By asking a question in a slightly different way or by acting somehow different I influence the course of the interview. And also various other aspects of the concrete setting of the interview (sometimes at first sight only details) can play a role.

In the interviews I always used a similar topic list. The formulation of each question I sometimes slightly modified when necessary based on the background of the interviewee. The topic list consisted of eight questions, each with several sub-questions. The questions were each focused on a topic I wanted to raise and the sub-questions were examples of questions I could ask for clarification or of follow-up questions. This is the topic list I used for my first interview, in Highwater with Roy. For the following interviews I used the same list, sometimes with little changes depending on the interviewee.

---

***Topic list used for the interviews***

1. *How did the Task Force / Leading Group start?*
  - a. *Who took the initiative?*
  - b. *What was the occasion for its start?*
  - c. *Why are there other organizations involved in the Task Force / Leading Group?*
2. *What has been your role at the start of the Task Force / Leading Group?*



- a. *Have you explicitly chosen for this role or did it come with your function?*
- b. *What did you think at that time about the economic crisis and the role of the municipality of Highwater / Dryland in this?*
3. *What was initially the goal of the Task Force / Leading Group?*
  - a. *Who formulated this goal?*
  - b. *What factors have influenced the formulation of this goal (other organizations or authorities, articles or other media, et cetera)?*
  - c. *Was this goal immediately clear for everyone and widely shared?*
4. *How did the Chances Card / list of activities start?*
  - a. *Who took the initiative and/or composed the Chances Card / list of activities?*
  - b. *Who came up with the activities and how did this go?*
  - c. *Which external organizations and/or factors have influenced what came on the Chances Card / list of activities?*
5. *How did the Task Force / Leading Group evolve over the last year?*
  - a. *Has the composition changed?*
  - b. *Have the topics changed?*
  - c. *Has the goal changed?*
  - d. *Have broader developments of the crisis influenced the development of the Task Force / Leading Group?*
6. *What is the current state of the Task Force / Leading Group?*
  - a. *What is currently the goal?*
  - b. *Are there certain themes or questions that play a role currently?*
  - c. *What do you think about the functioning of the Task Force / Leading Group at this moment?*
  - d. *What do you think about the current state of the economic crisis?*
7. *How are the dynamics in the Task Force / Leading Group?*
  - a. *Do the members agree about the analysis of the crisis?*
  - b. *Do the members agree about the measures to be taken?*
  - c. *Are there also members who disagree about the course of the Task Force / Leading Group?*
  - d. *Are there discussions about this in the Task Force / Leading Group?*
  - e. *Who is decisive in the discussions in the Task Force / Leading Group?*
  - f. *What is your own role in this?*
8. *What do you expect of the Task Force / Leading Group in the next year?*
  - a. *Will the Task Force / Leading Group keep existing?*
  - b. *What will the Task Force / Leading Group be doing in the next year?*
  - c. *What do you expect of your own role in the Task Force / Leading Group in the next year?*
  - d. *How do you think the economic crisis will evolve in the next year?*

By using the same topic list, I made sure that roughly the same subjects were discussed. This was only a general guideline, because I did not stick to the questionnaire too tight. I wanted the interviewees mainly to tell their own story, so tried to give them the maximum opportunity to do this. This fit in Sandberg's (2005) communicative validity: making sure as a researcher that your interpretations connect to what the research objects actually say. Therefore, I used the questionnaire primarily as a guideline and checklist to see if every issue I wanted to discuss had indeed been addressed. The order in which I posed the questions, however, I chose depending on the course of the conversation. The sub-questions I only asked if it was necessary to clarify a question, to keep the conversation going or as a follow-up question. Sometimes I also asked other questions if I wanted to take up something the interviewee said. My intention with this was that I had real conversations or dialogues with the interviewees, more than merely interviews. In a tight interview my influence would be stronger, and by having more of a conversation or dialogue I tried to let the interviewee tell his or her own story and to stay more in the background myself. However, from the three methods of data collection I used, in the interviews my influence as a researcher was nevertheless the largest.

I recorded the interviews and made transcripts of them afterwards. With these transcripts I analyzed the interviews. I hereby looked for traces of discourses, in a similar way as I described for the meeting reports. Again, I used the distinction between the structure and the agency perspective. The advantage of these interviews was that I had literal quotes from the interviewees, in contrast to the meetings from which I had only my own reports based on my notes. In the stories of the municipalities in chapters 5 and 6 I therefore often used these verbatim quotes from the group members. After all, these are closest to the language of the participants themselves.

#### 4.3.4      *Finishing the data collection*

Both groups I followed for a period of approximately one year. As a conclusion, I had a final conversation with my contacts at both municipalities. They asked me to write down my findings with respect to their group. I did this for both municipalities. This was at the end of 2011, when I had not yet finished my data analysis. So writing down my findings for these people was a little premature compared to my findings as I give them here (in the following chapters). But also the nature of the findings was different. In this research, as I describe it here, I used a specific method, in line with my view on doing research and broader on 'reality'. I spent the last four chapters to describe this view and method. I have not explained this to the members of the groups. Before them this was rather complex and not quite relevant. I only broadly explained what the subject of my research was and how I would collect my data. In line with this I also wrote my findings for them. In two or three pages, I wrote down some mainly practical findings for both municipalities. I discussed them with my contacts at the municipalities. In one municipality,

Dryland, this was the secretary of the group, a municipal official. My conversation with him was in effect the concluding session at this municipality.

In the other municipality, Highwater, I had a conversation with three people: the responsible manager, with whom I also the first conversation together with the city manager, the secretary of the group and a third municipal official, who was the second secretary of the group. At the end of this conversation they asked me to present my findings also in the next meeting of the group. They would tell me when this was. Eventually I was invited to the meeting of 26 November 2012. This was one year after I had written down my findings. I heard that there had been some meetings in the meantime, but for reasons unknown to me I was not invited for those meetings. In the meeting of 26 November 2012 I briefly explained my findings to the group. This was at the end of the meeting, when there were only ten minutes left, so it was very brief. Some of the attendees (from some 'external' parties) had also only recently joined the group, so they had not been there during my actual research. Based on my presentation a brief discussion started between one of the 'external' members and the responsible manager from the municipality. This discussion was about whether the group was something of the municipality or of all members jointly. I had made a comment that in my view this was not very clear for the various members. This discussion was ended soon again because of the little time that was left in the meeting. However, in the email with the report of the meeting, which was sent the next day, the municipality proposed, based on my findings, to hold the future meetings of the group on different locations. The members were asked who had an available location for the next meeting. This was an interesting direct result of the discussion of the findings that I had presented.

I promised my contacts in both municipalities to send them a copy of my dissertation. I will indeed do this after I finished this book. Then I may also again have contact with one or more parties of the groups that I have researched.

#### 4.3.5     *Analyzing and describing the groups*

In my analysis I made use of three types of data: documents, reports I made of the meetings that I attended, and transcripts of recordings of the interviews I held. In these 'texts' I started looking for traces of discourses, from the two perspectives that I use. In describing the discourses, I used a lot of quotes from interview transcripts and documents as well as excerpts from my meeting reports. I did this in order to stay as close as possible to my source material. From the perspective of communicative validity (Sandberg 2005) it was important to align my interpretations to the 'lived experience' of the research objects. Describing a discourse is always a construction from me as the researcher. This is unavoidable. However, by constructing this description as much as possible from examples from my source material I account for this description. Of course, also the choice of the quotes and fragments is personal. I tried however to make this choice in a transparent manner

by using many quotations and fragments, by making the fragments and quotations not too short so that the reader sees some context, and by using excerpts and quotes from various interviews, meetings and documents.

I have not presented my analyses to my research objects, to see if they recognized themselves in my analysis. It was not my intention to check with my research objects if my analysis was 'right'. This has to do first of all with the fact that I do my analysis from a specific methodology: I search for discourses and look at my data from two different perspectives, structure and agency. This methodology is unknown to my research objects, which means that they will recognize the analysis only partly. Moreover, my analysis, broader than the methodology that I use, is written with my vocabulary. This vocabulary makes it my personal story, which hopefully will contribute to different discourses. In chapter 2 I already wrote about this when I described my audience. This also means that my story does not have to be fully recognizable for my research objects. By staying close to the source texts and using quotes, I try to avoid the use of incorrect texts, but the way in which I subsequently reconstruct the discourses based on these texts is from my perspective and in my vocabulary. Or, as Hajer says it:

*"Discourses are therefore 'found' or traced by the analyst. Discourses might not be immediately obvious to the people that utter them, although respondents should recognise a discourse when pointed out to them by the analyst."*

Hajer 2006, 68

#### **4.4 My role as a researcher**

Before turning to the specific description of the two municipalities, I end this chapter with a reflection on my role as a researcher. In the descriptions of the two municipalities I also do this more concretely and focused on that particular municipality, but here I make some general comments linked to my research method as I described it above.

##### 4.4.1 Consistency, transparency, reflexivity and epoché

The research method as I described it above evolved in practice less organized than might appear from the description. For the sake of consistency, I tried to describe my method and process in a logical and coherent manner. I also stressed how this method and process are linked to my ontology, epistemology and methodology. This led to a consistent story that is easy readable for my audience. For the sake of transparency and reflexivity I should also mention that the actual process evolved not as ordered and structured. I adjusted my research several times and changed

its direction. This is in my view a logical consequence of the process associated with academic research.

#### 4.4.2     Power

In the role of the researcher the concept of power is also at stake. This is in line with what I said before about *epoché*. The researcher that is aware of the importance of being reluctant with his interpretations does so because of his awareness of his power as a researcher. I previously said different things about the concept of power. To conclude this chapter I will again discuss the role of power in my research, this time specifically related to my role as a researcher in my empirical research. In the discourses that are confronted with each other in my research, power is exercised. This is inevitable, and can also be identified on different places in my research. As I outlined above, in my empirical research mainly two discourses 'collide' with each other: the academic discourse of my ontology, epistemology and methodology, as I outlined in the first chapters of this book, and the practical discourse of the two municipalities that I have researched. From both discourses power is exercised over the other discourse.

The power exercised from the academic discourse over my research in the two municipalities is clearly identifiable. First, the practice in both municipalities is affected by my academic discourse through my presence in the groups and my role as interviewer. Although I tried to remain on the background, my presence inevitably affected the course of events. In the interviews this is particularly evident. I ask the questions, by which I inevitably influence the conversation. This can be through my choice of certain words, but also by my intonation. During the interviews, I tried to ask questions that invited the interviewees to tell their own story. I did not stick tightly to the topic list, but I tried to follow the conversation. Yet my questions and responses largely arose from my interests from the academic discourse in which I participate, from my ontology, epistemology and methodology. These questions and responses partly influenced the conversation. In the meetings my influence was smaller. I was here part of a larger group, and played a very passive role. I did not mix up in conversations, and was only listening and making notes. Still, just the fact that I was there listening and writing and the fact that they knew I was there to study their group's decision making, may have influenced what the members of the groups said and how they acted.

Second, my description of the discourses in the municipalities was motivated by the way I set out the research based on my ontology, epistemology and methodology. I describe the practice in both municipalities as discursive reality. I am looking for discourses, which I defined from my academic discourse. I describe these discourses as I see them and distract them from the various data I have at my disposal. I hereby reduce my experiences of more than a year of research, my observations of meetings, of the interviews I held and of the analysis of the documents, to the description I give in this thesis. This means by definition that I omit a lot of experiences and

describe only a limited number of experiences. This can be seen quite clearly in my analysis of the interviews. I first made transcripts of all the interviews. I then selected fragments from these transcripts that I considered as texts, as traces of discourses. From these traces, I then constructed coherent wholes of discourses. These discourses I described in this thesis. Between the literal transcripts of the interviews and the descriptions in this thesis lies therefore a significant process of analysis. The way in which I describe the discourses are in a sequence and in a way that represent my view of the discourses. This is clearly influenced by the academic discourse in which I participate.

In addition, my description of the discourses can also affect the future development of the discourses. If people read this book or hear about it, it may be that they will look differently at the functioning of their group.

The practice discourse also exercises power over the academic discourse. In part this will appear in the descriptions of the municipalities that I give in the following chapters, but there are already examples of how the practice discourse has influenced the course of my research. One example I already mentioned in the previous paragraph, in my description of the interviews. There I described that I initially planned to interview only people from the municipalities and to interview each of them twice during my research. Gradually, influenced by the practice discourse that showed that especially in one of the two groups much importance was given to the cooperation between municipalities and social partners, I chose to interview also a number of social partners and to reduce the number of interviews with each person to one. This is a small example of how the course of my research was influenced by the practice discourse in the municipalities. In the words of Burawoy: "dialogue between participant and observer provides an ever-changing sieve for collecting data. This is not to deny that we come to the field with presuppositions, questions, and frameworks but that they are more like prisms than templates and they are emergent rather than fixed" (Burawoy 1998, 11). In chapter 7 I will come back again to this, and look how my research contributes to the academic discourse in which I participate. This contribution or relevance will partly lie in the influence of the practice discourses in the two municipalities.

#### 4.4.3 Construction of the researcher

The power exercised through the various discourses that come together in my research brings me to an important point regarding my role as a researcher. In this research, I participate in all the different discourses that play a role in this research. The power emanating from all the different discourses is exercised among others over me. This leads to the point that I described when I deepened Foucault's understanding of discourse in section 3.1.3: the construction of the subject. The human being as a subject is being constructed in the discourses in which he participates. This is in line with Rorty's idea of the contingency of man (see section 2.1). Applied to this research this means that I, as a researcher in this study, am also constructed as a subject within the discourses

in which I participate. As a subject I am constructed during this research to the subject that is now writing this book. More concretely formulated, as a researcher I am constantly influenced during this research by the power that emanates from the discourses in this study. In particular, my academic discourse and the practice discourses in the two municipalities have enriched me as a person. I also evolved in this study. Such an observation will probably be recognizable to many researchers, in a sense that one learns from the research one performs, that the research makes one look at reality in a different way. From the perspective of Rorty and Foucault, this goes one step deeper. The researcher is actually formed by the research. This underlines again the characterization of the research as a search process.





## 5 The Task Force of Highwater

The first municipality that I describe is Highwater. As said before this is a fictitious name of the town where I did my first empirical research. The names of the persons that appear in this chapter are also fictitious.

In section 5.1 I tell the story of this municipality from a structure perspective. This story shows how existing discourses influenced the practice of the Task Force in Highwater.

In section 5.2 I tell again the story of the Task Force in Highwater, but this time from an agency perspective. This story shows how meaning is given to the reality of, among others, the economic crisis, in the interaction between the persons involved in the Task Force.

In section 5.3 I give a reflection on my research in the municipality of Highwater. Here I will describe the relationship between the two stories about Highwater and my role as a researcher.

### **5.1 The Task Force of Highwater from a structure perspective**

In this section I tell the story of Highwater from a structure perspective. In this story, I discuss the various existing discourses that have affected the practice of the Task Force. These are sometimes discourses that existed broader in society, but sometimes also local discourses that affected the current practice of the Task Force. I successively discuss five of these existing discourses. At the end of this section I will discuss the power of structure, as it could be seen in Highwater in the discourse-in-practice.

#### 5.1.1 Broader existing discourses on the economic situation

For the discourse within the Task Force on the state of the economic crisis, or in a broader sense of the economy, some broader and existing discourses played an important role.

##### 5.1.1.1. The Trend Monitor

For determining the state of the economy, the so-called Trend Monitor was used a lot. This was a document that was composed quarterly by a research company, commissioned by the municipality of Highwater. Jim, the researcher of the company that composed it, came to the Task Force every three months to explain and discuss the Trend Monitor.

*The third topic is the Trend Monitor. This is composed by [name of the research company], so [Jim] gives an explanation. He starts by saying that the purpose of the Trend Monitor is to show the local effects of the recession. He stresses that this Trend Monitor does not give any final answers, because it is composed of a limited number of indicators. The Trend Monitor is based on the 'COEN<sup>2</sup> 2nd quarter'.*

---

<sup>2</sup> COEN is an abbreviation of a Dutch national monitor of the economic situation in the Netherlands.

The Trend Monitor consisted of about twenty indicators, which were measured each quarter of a year. The indicators were grouped into five chapters (source: Trend Monitor 12 April 2010):

- Regional economic climate:
  - Regional business confidence
  - Regional turnover development
- Business activity in Highwater:
  - Bankruptcies
  - Start-up companies
  - Supply of industrial space
  - Supply of office space
  - Supply of retail space
- Employment and unemployment:
  - Registered jobseekers
  - Inflow, outflow and file development of WWB (Dutch law for social assistance)
  - Submitted job vacancies at UWV (CWI) (the Dutch employee insurance agency)
  - Temporary agency workers
- Housing market:
  - Legal fees for building permits
  - Finished new-build houses
  - Housing supply
  - Number of days houses are for sale
  - Asking price
- Consumer behavior:
  - Use of parking garages
  - Supply of cars
  - Applications for debt assistance

As Jim explains in the above fragment, the Trend Monitor was based on existing statistics. No new figures and indicators were collected for the Trend Monitor, but it was an assemblage of existing data from the municipality and from other organizations. In this case, Jim refers to the "COEN 2nd quarter", a nationwide survey on which this Trend Monitor was primarily based apparently. In discussing the state of the economy, the Trend Monitor played a major role. After its appearance, the Trend Monitor was sent along with the meeting documents and rather thoroughly discussed at the meeting. Some of the meetings I attended were specially planned shortly after the appearance of the new Trend Monitor. At my last meeting of the Task Force, which I attended on 16 May 2011, the Trend Monitor was even the only topic on the agenda. This clearly shows the importance attached to the Trend Monitor. However, this is the use of existing statistics, composed by a

research company, in order to discuss the state of the economy in the Taskforce. Besides, the choice of indicators by the research company, in collaboration with the municipality, has determined the Trend Monitor and therefore also the discussion of the state of the economy in the Task Force to a large extent. The choice of the twenty indicators was after all rather arbitrary; it could also have been other indicators. But the trends that were deduced from them did affect the image of the state of the economy that was constructed in the Task Force. The trends from the Trend Monitor were the starting point for the discussion the Task Force about the state of the economy. When the Trend Monitor showed mainly positive trends, then the members of the Task Force would speak more positively about the economic situation, and vice versa. This use of the Trend Monitor is a clear example of how the discourse in the Taskforce was framed by existing discourses about the economy.

#### 5.1.1.2. The COEN survey

In the above fragment, it was already mentioned that the Trend Monitor was based on the 'COEN 2nd quarter'. This COEN itself was also discussed at the meetings of the Task Force. The following fragment is from the report that I made from the internal meeting (i.e. only with representatives of the municipality) of 28 June 2010.

*At topic 4, the survey of the economic climate (COEN) of the Chamber of Commerce, both [Richard] and [Neil] mention that the document is properly drafted and pleasant to read. However, [Richard] has the impression that the survey paints a fairly positive picture compared to what he reads in the newspapers. [Roy] responds that one of the functions of the survey also is to give a positive signal. [Richard] indicates that in the survey only for the construction industry a negative image is sketched. [Roy] adds that the construction and in a broader sense the housing market is worrying.*

Task Force meeting (internal), 28 June 2010

During this internal meeting of the Task Force the COEN survey itself was on the agenda. The fragment shows how the members of the Task Force paint a picture of the state of the economy based on the COEN. Richard says that the COEN "paints a fairly positive picture" and outlines that "only for the construction industry a negative image is sketched." These images from the COEN strongly determine the discussion in the Task Force. Moreover, it is interesting that this fragment also refers to the newspapers. Newspaper articles apparently are also existing 'images' that affect the practice of the Task Force.

#### 5.1.1.3. External 'images' of the economic situation

There were other elements from outside the Task Force that affected the image of the state of the economy within the Task Force. A clear example of this can be seen in the following fragment from my report of the meeting of the Task Force on 21 February 2011.

*In chapter 2, Business activity, [Jim] explains that the number of bankruptcies is relatively small, and that it often involves companies with few employees. The bankruptcy of [name of a local company] is an exception (but is not yet included in the statistics of the Trend Monitor).*

*[Bill] suggests to take the statistics of the region along because many residents of [Highwater] work in the region. He says that in the region in particular the construction sector has been hit. On the other hand there are many family businesses in this region, which often have a financial buffer and therefore endure longer. He also mentions that he has spoken to several architects who think that the economy is recovering. [Alan] says that he hears that 2011 will be a difficult year and that we have to drink the 'cup of poison' completely. He asks whether this is true. [Bill] replies that it remains to be seen. He hopes things will get better starting in the third quarter. [Neil] also says that he hears from architects that things are getting better. [Roy] says he is less positive. Partly due to the bankruptcy of [name of local company], there is more distrust in the market. [Graham] responds that the volume of the market is not declining.*

Taskforce meeting (external), 21 February 2011

In this fragment the Trend Monitor is discussed. Several members of the Task Force successively refer to various external discourses about the state of the economy. The first one is Alan, alderman and chairman of the Task Force: "[Alan] says that he hears that 2011 will still be a difficult year and that we have to drink the 'cup of poison' completely". Alan refers to what he 'hears'. He does not say specifically from whom he 'hears' these things, but his view of the state of the economy is clearly (at least in part) based on it. And this is not very positive: 2011 will still be a difficult year. Neil reacts to this, and also uses something he 'hears' as an argument: "[Neil] also says that he hears from architects that things are getting better". Neil paints a more positive picture of the economy here. He refers to what he hears from architects. A third response, again more negative, comes from Roy. He also uses an external element as an argument: "Due to the bankruptcy of [name of local company], there is more distrust in the market". Roy refers to a rather big company from Highwater that went bankrupt shortly before. This bankruptcy had a great impact on the image of the economy. Jim also refers to it in this fragment, when he says that the impact of this bankruptcy is not yet included in the statistics of the Trend Monitor. From this discussion in the Task Force it is evident how the various members based their opinions on broader and existing discourses and how the practice within the Task Force was also influenced by these external factors.

Another example of the influence of an external discourse on the practice within the Task Force when it comes to the state of the economy is reflected in the following fragment, again from my report of the meeting of the Task Force on 21 February 2011.

*[Alan] concludes about the overall Trend Monitor that the picture is not too rosy. [Roy] responds that he is not discontent, because the concerns are known by now. [Alan] says he at least thinks it is good to see that the number of people on social assistance is not rising. He also refers to statements from the news of this*

*past weekend that [name of province] should take over part of the housing of [name of a big city]. This would be positive for the region.*

Task Force meeting (external), 21 February 2011

This fragment shows the conclusion of the discussion about the Trend Monitor. All chapters and indicators have been discussed, and as chairman Alan tries to draw a general conclusion. This raises a little discussion, in which Alan refers to "statements from the news of this past weekend that [name of province] should take over part of the housing of [name of a big city]. This would be positive for the region". On several other occasions, Alan also uses such arguments from 'outside'. In the previous fragment, Alan also came with something that he had 'heard', and here he refers to 'statements from the news'. Another example is the following fragment from my report of the meeting of the Task Force on 16 May 2011.

*Then follow the number of submitted job vacancies at UWV (the Dutch employee insurance agency). [Jim] says that these statistics are difficult to interpret, because they really vary each month. [Monica] says that this is true, it is quite a variable picture. [Edward] asks if she expects youth unemployment to rise in the summer period after the exams. [Monica] replied that she does not expect this. In September there is always a temporary increase, but this is not structural. [Alan] says that during a visit with the college of mayor and aldermen last week, he has spoken to a youth worker who called the unemployment rate in low-skilled and unskilled labor worrying.*

Task Force meeting (external), 16 May 2011

This fragment is also from a discussion of the Trend Monitor. And also here Alan takes part in the conversation with an argument 'from outside': "[Alan] says that during a visit with the college of mayor and aldermen last week, he has spoken to a youth worker who called the unemployment rate in low-skilled and unskilled labor worrying". He introduces a youth worker and bases his contribution to the discussion on what he heard from this person. The reason why Alan used such external discourses so frequently is not entirely clear. It seems to be related to the fact that he was new in the Task Force and in his position as alderman. As a result, he perhaps had too little knowledge of the subject, and he therefore relied on 'others'. Anyway, here, and also from the examples from earlier fragments, it appears that the role of broader and existing discourses on the practice in the Taskforce was large with regard to the state of the economy.

### 5.1.2 Activities of the Task Force following examples from elsewhere

A second important discourse within the Task Force was about the activities the Task Force should do. This discourse was about the Chances Card (in Dutch: Kansenskaart), a list of activities that was composed in the early days of the Task Force (before I started my research in Highwater). The list described how the budget that the city council made available to the Task Force was spent. At the moment I started my research in the Task Force, this budget was almost completely spent, and

the conversation in the Task Force was about new activities on which the remainder of the budget could be spent. But in my interviews with the members of the Task Force I also looked back at the genesis of the Chances Card.

#### 5.1.2.1. Specific activities motivated by broader trends

The activities of the Task Force were also largely influenced by broader and existing discourses. This can be illustrated by the following fragment from the interview with Neil, the policy advisor for Economic Affairs of the municipality of Highwater.

- Mark: *"What have been the most important developments from last year, year and a half?"*
- Neil: *"Ehhh ... well, I actually consider it as ... I think it was an opportunity for the municipality and local businesses to act together, and to me, at least, that was my, that was at first my perception. Like, okay, often in emergency situations, you can achieve beautiful things. And... for me the result is actually that a missed opportunity has become very clear. For the rest it is all quite marginal. I mean, some things have been done, but hey, what can you do with a million? Well, actually only 800,000 euros has been spent. Look, for example, what it is very strong, what I find very good, that is that starters..., no, that, yeah, that starters counter? What is it called... start index. That is something the budget was used for. Well, that is a trend that was coming up. That was an initiative, that was a national initiative that is implemented here. Well, that converged nicely."*
- Mark: *"But that was actually a trend that already existed, that fit with the local developments?"*
- Neil: *"That was a national trend that had to be facilitated and, well, as I said, it fit perfectly with this budget."*
- [...]
- Neil: *"I must say, like... a positive thing is that, well, our procurement policy, here internally, which I think is the gain, one started to rethink it. Because we have here a trauma from the construction fraud affair. This trauma was still very strong in the previous college of mayor and aldermen, because there were a few aldermen who had experienced it themselves, as well as the city manager. And, well, then you get an undue reaction, so to speak. And so the contracting and procurement policy was completely boarded up. Right now there has been made some room again, to use it with a little more flexibility. And I must say, [Graham] put quite some effort in this. So it has been discussed a number of times, so in that sense..."*
- Mark: *"To give local entrepreneurs more opportunities, I believe, right? That was pretty much the..."*
- Neil: *"Yes. Exactly. Yes, that was the essence of the issue. Yes. And to make sure that not everything was lumped, so smaller businesses could also participate. Yes. Yes, I have to mention that as a positive development, absolutely."*

Interview Neil, 11 October 2010

In this fragment, Neil describes the period from the establishment of the Task Force until then. He is quite negative about the Task Force and the activities that have been done based on the Chances Card. He mentions two activities as positive exceptions. It is remarkable that both activities are actually reactions to external developments.

The first activity Neil mentions is called the 'start index'. He calls it a positive example, but he adds right away: "that was a national initiative that is implemented here. Well, that converged nicely." This start index would apparently also have been introduced without the Task Force and the Chances Card, only now it was financed from the budget of the Chance Card.

The second example Neil refers to is the procurement policy. Under pressure from the entrepreneurs, specifically Graham in the Task Force, the procurement policy of the municipality was eased a little. Because of this, local entrepreneurs have more opportunities to participate in tendering processes of the municipality. This is, according to Neil, another positive effect of the Chances Card. But again he stresses the external influences: "we have here a trauma from the construction fraud affair." This construction fraud affair was a national affair that occurred a few years earlier in the Netherlands and was about illegal price agreements between companies in the construction sector. This affair has apparently affected the procurement policy of the municipality of Highwater and resulted in the fact that the policy was completely "boarded up". Thus, also this activity from the Chances Card is ultimately influenced by external factors.

#### 5.1.2.2. The advertising tax affected the attitude of entrepreneurs

In addition to the specific activities on the Chances Card, the process of composing the Chances Card was also discussed a lot, especially by the representatives of the municipality. Some of them pointed out that the ideas had to come mainly from the municipality. George also said this in the interview I had with him.

George: *"[With] the retailers we were of course already working on the implementation of the advertising tax. We did not ask them, but they might have thought: all right, now we are going to take care of ourselves a little. All activities that are important to us as retailers, particularly in the city center and there were also other entrepreneurs involved, we already get by means of the advertising tax, so, and for that they as [local association of entrepreneurs] had taken the lead. They may also have thought: well, we already get 1 million per year, for 12 years, so maybe we should..."*

Mark: *"Because what was that...What exactly is that advertising tax, what does it mean?"*

George: *"Well...You could see... You can see on industrial sites and in city centers, you see a number of entrepreneurs who want to do something nice for their street or for the industrial site: mowing the lawn on the industrial site or taking care of the 'Sinterklaas' [a Dutch holiday] lighting in the city center. That costs money, and then they have to, in their street meetings or the meeting of the city center retailers, they had to ask each entrepreneur individually: do you want to donate something for hanging the 'Sinterklaas' lighting? Well, some donated something, but especially the retail chain stores never donated anything. Because why should [name of a large retail chain] do something about 'Sinterklaas'? What is his benefit? Then she said: well, we would still like to continue those activities, but we want to get rid of that bother of asking for individual donations. Can you help us entrepreneurs with a means that the municipality has, taxes, and when those taxes are collected, whether it is, it can be a tax on advertising, but it can also be an increase in the WOZ [Dutch abbreviation for 'Valuation of Property'], a kind of surcharges, then everyone pays and the money*

*that you collect this way, you subtract the costs, the costs to raise taxes, and we get what remains and that we distribute among all those activities. We were also working on this, so that might have been a consideration for them: well, we are already getting served, so let that one million... for two years, well, let them go ahead, and we have already made sure, in proper consultation, that we get what we want. We never asked them and they have specifically said so: we ask... Well, they never really asked for anything. But they also never said: we need nothing."*

Interview George, 11 October 2010

George points in this fragment on the impact of the introduction of the advertising tax on the attitude of the entrepreneurs during the period that the Chances Card was composed. According to George, the fact that the entrepreneurs came with few ideas for activities on the Chances Card had to do with the fact that they had gotten other resources available for their ideas through the advertising tax. Because these two developments ran parallel, the entrepreneurs were more passive in the process of composing the chance card and allowed the initiative to the municipality. The practice of the Task Force was clearly influenced here by this external discourse of the advertising tax.

#### 5.1.2.3. New ideas were inspired by examples from elsewhere

As mentioned, the process of the composition of the Chances Card had already taken place in the period before I started following the Task Force. At the moment I joined in the Task Force, a review of the Chance Card had started and they tried to come up with activities to spend the last part of the available budget on: approximately 150,000 euros. For these possible new activities, the members of the Task Force again looked at a lot of examples from elsewhere. I will mention some examples.

*A second idea that [Alan] mentions is supporting young starters on the housing market. He has seen an example in the municipality of [name of a smaller neighboring municipality]. The others respond that this is already happening in [Highwater].*

Task Force meeting (internal), 28 June 2010

During this internal meeting of the Task Force, so with only the representatives of the municipality of Highwater, possible activities for spending the last part of the budget of the Chances Card on is listed. Alan has two proposals. His second proposal, supporting young started on the housing market, is pushed aside because this is already happening in Highwater. But what is striking is that this second proposal is motivated by an example of another (neighboring) municipality. As I have already mentioned, Alan relied quite often on examples from elsewhere. This is also what happens here.



But it is not just Alan whose ideas for activities are inspired by examples from elsewhere. The following fragment is from my report of the same internal meeting of the Task Force on 28 June 2010.

*[Roy] mentions the idea of the 'big bonus to help young people find a job', which is described in a newspaper article that was sent along with the agenda. Hereby companies can earn a bonus if they help a young person to get a job. [Diana] indicates that this project is already running. [Neil] suggests that there might be given more publicity to the project because it is quite unknown. [Diana] says that the municipality of [name of a neighboring municipality] has the lead in this project, so that they are primarily working on it. [Richard] believes that it may be good to use also the files from the Chamber of Commerce in this project, and [Neil] mentions the contacts of the [name of the local association of entrepreneurs].*

Task Force meeting (internal), 28 June 2010

Roy also has a proposal here for an activity for the Chances Card and he also relies on an example from elsewhere. In this case, he gets his example from a newspaper article. Again, this proposal appears to exist already in Highwater, but it is remarkable that another new proposal is based on an external example.

In one of the following external meetings of the Task Force the issue of the remaining budget of the Chances Card is also discussed.

*Topic 6 is the status of the Chances Card. [Roy] explains that the measures are 'ready' and that a report to the city council has to be made. There is still 250,000 to 350,000 euros left. Until now, there have been few proposals for concrete new measures. He mentions two of them. The first is to encourage work placements in construction at [name of a new housing estate]. This would cost 150,000 to 200,000 euros. [Sean] responds that in Amsterdam there are examples of this.*

Task Force meeting (external), 18 October 2010

In this fragment, Roy mentions the proposals that have been mentioned until then for spending the remainder of the budget. When he mentions the first proposal, one of the external members, namely Sean from 'Bouwend Nederland', responds "that in Amsterdam there are examples of this". Again, this proposal appears to be not original, but motivated by a broader existing discourse.

### 5.1.3      *Influence of the public savings discourse on the Task Force*

A third important issue within the Task Force in Highwater was the impact of the public savings on the Task Force. These savings played a role in the Task Force in different ways.

#### 5.1.3.1.      *The public savings affect the financial potential of the Task Force*

In the interview with Diana the impact of the public savings is discussed, as appears in the following fragment.

*Mark: "If you look at the year ahead... uhm... well, in the last meeting I believe, or the meeting before that one it was said: we will continue with the Task Force at least for the time being. How do you look at the coming year, at the role of the Task Force and how it will develop?"*

*Diana: "I think it will be a little bit at the same level, in the sense of just catching up and..."*

*Mark: "Yes. So mainly consultation."*

*Diana: "Yes."*

*Mark: "Less... well, the budget was running out. Do you expect that there will be again..."*

*Diana: "... a budget? "*

*Mark: "... a budget again or... no?"*

*Diana: "No way (laughs). No, I don't think so. It is unlikely that that will happen. We have to cut 18 million, and this was nice, but I do not think that the new college will say: we will do this again. That's unlikely. No."*

*Mark: "So it remains mostly a consultation about what is going on, about how things are going..."*

*Diana: "Yeah, staying a little bit informed about each other, and well, you can use that as input for the rest of your policy. Yes. But well, the question is, I think, whether it will remain interesting in the long run for these parties to join."*

*Mark: "Because will you as Task Force also actively do things, or will it be mostly catching up?"*

*Diana: "Uhm... I think it will be mainly catching up. Perhaps sometimes a project will be developed of which you think: okay, well, that's useful, but... that's a bit difficult to estimate."*

*Mark: "Yes. Well, you do not know what's going to happen..."*

*Diana: "... what will happen, yeah, look, if we have to cut 18 million then... you see that... at the time when there was a new chairman, the external parties immediately were like, oh, will he be there at that meeting, because that is still an opportunity to meet with 'the alderman'. In that sense, that is also important for those parties. Yes."*

Interview Diana, 10 August 2010

When I ask whether there might still be a new or supplementary budget for the Task Force, Diana reacts very strongly: "No way (laughs). No, I don't think so. It's unlikely that that will happen. We have to cut 18 million, and this was nice, but I do not think that the new college will say: we will do this again. That's unlikely." The link with the public savings is made very directly here. The provision of the budget at the start of the Task Force was before there were public savings, but that will no longer be possible. Diana does not rule out the possibility that this may have implications for the survival of the Task Force: "the question is, I think, whether it will remain interesting in the long run for these parties to join." The influence of the public savings on the practice of the Task Force is, according to Diana, very clear. It is so because the possibility of providing a new budget by the city council and / or the college is minimized, but possibly also because as a consequence, the Task Force might even be abolished.

This link between the public savings and a possible new budget for the Task Force, and even the survival of the Task Force, was also made by Graham. The following fragment is from the interview I had with this chairman of the local association of entrepreneurs.

*Mark: "And could it be that, somewhere in the next year, it is said: well, we have something, we want to have, we really need an 'X' amount to give that a good incentive, that new money will become available, or...?"*

*Graham: "I fear not. No, I fear that in the current circumstances that will not happen. But, well, if it is very important, well, then you will of course put it on the Chances Card. But I fear that the discussion over the next year and a half will be about something else, and that is: what can and can't we maintain? You know, in the context of the public savings."*

Interview Graham, 7 March 2011

This fragment is the end of the interview with Graham. When I ask about Graham's expectations for the future of the Task Force, he brings up the public savings himself. Like Diana Graham also believes that in the next period, no new budget will be made available by the municipality: "I fear that the discussion over the next year and a half will be about something else, and that is: what can and can't we maintain? You know, in the context of the public savings." The public savings influence the Task Force clearly in this way, by reducing the possibility of a new budget

#### 5.1.3.2. The public savings discourse affects the role of the Task Force

In the first interview I did in Highwater, with Roy, the subject of public savings came up right away.

*[Roy] mentions that the process of reconsiderations has played a role. From the beginning of the Task Force it was already clear that municipalities should have to cut their budgets, partly due to the effect of the national public savings. Because of this, he has considered it as one of the tasks of the Task Force to ensure that the municipality would not be too much defensive, waiting and seeing and not daring to take any action.*

Report interview Roy, 14 June 2010

Roy points here especially on the impact of the national public savings on the local situation in Highwater. Although initially there were no public savings in the municipality of Highwater, it soon became clear that the national budget cuts would have their effect on the local situation, and that local budget cuts were inevitable. In that sense, the national public savings already influenced the practice of the Task Force, because people already took into account budget cuts in Highwater itself. In this fragment Roy also indicates what this meant, according to him, for the Task Force, namely the need to "ensure that the municipality would not be too defensive, waiting and seeing and not daring to take any action." This watchdog function that Roy saw for the Task Force was clearly a result of the nationwide public savings.

Soon, however, the public savings were also present at the local level. The municipality of Highwater had to cut budgets and this had its impact on the Task Force, as the following fragment from the interview with Roy shows.

*I ask what the current status of the Task Force is. [Roy] indicates that the group still thinks of the sharing of information as a positive thing. He refers to the meeting of 19 April, where this issue was discussed and where I was also present. However, he indicated that the concrete actions are 'running a bit dry'. He believes that the Task Force should make sure that the public savings that are necessary right now will not lead to a running dry of investments. In [Highwater] one is also busy with the upcoming public savings. The size of the national budget cuts is still uncertain, but [Highwater] is already taking them into account. One does not want to talk about 'cuts', but 'bendings'. Innovation teams have been formed, that had to come up with ideas for these bendings. It has led to about € 24 million of ideas. These ideas still need to be considered and eventually probably about € 15 to € 20 million in bendings will remain.*

*[Roy] mentions that the bendings process and the Task Force are considered as two separate processes. However, he considers it as a task for the Task Force to continue to emphasize that stagnation means decline. He believes that the bendings process is arranged according to this principle.*

Report interview Roy, 14 June 2010

Roy refers to the "bendings process" that is currently going on within the municipality of Highwater. Although he sees this as a separate process from the Task Force, he also clearly explains the connection between the two: "the Task Force should make sure that the public savings that are necessary right now will not lead to a running dry of investments." Because of the public savings the Task Force gets as it were a new task or function, namely the signal function towards the municipality to ensure that there is money left for investments. In other words, it is "a task for the Task Force to continue to emphasize that stagnation means decline." The Task Force is therefore clearly influenced by the broader public savings discourse.

George also mentions the impact that the public savings discourse might have on the role of the Task Force. The following fragment is from the interview with him.

*Mark: "And what do you think about, say, the current state of, well, the Task Force but also in the context of the current state the economic crisis, so to speak? In that context, is the Task Force still needed? What is its role now, its function?"*

*George: "Well, you know what the danger, you know what I consider as a danger? No, what could be a danger: on 31 December that reserve ends. And if it would be decided, you know, for whatever reason, like: we need the money... we need to bend 18 million euros, well, then at least we have found 350,000, so let's use that. And then there is the risk as if the economic crisis no longer exists. That it's over and, well, we have done our best and, well, now we go back to 'business as usual'. And continuing the Task Force and continuing the Trend Monitor I think keeps us as a municipality sharp, to keep on looking at: so how do we proceed? Because no matter how much we need to cut back, we will also always have money for new policies. And it may very well be that, maybe 350,000 is still*

*not enough and maybe we need to invest 600,000 into the economy once again to keep it going, because well, the economy is going a little better, but of course it's not, it's still not great. And certainly not in certain sections. If you hear, you know, still this week, what was it, the day before yesterday, that the housing market is still under serious pressure. Well, we have to build a new neighborhood, [name new neighborhood], so..."*

*Mark: "Yes. Yeah, so you say: the continuing of the consultation form is good, to keep tabs on the situation..."*

*George: "Yes."*

*Mark: "...and the money that is still left, we need to keep it available and it may even be, right now there might not be more money needed, but that possibility should be kept open."*

*George: "No, no. Should be... yes, yes, yes. And you can only monitor that if you use the instruments of such a meeting and of such a Trend Monitor, because otherwise, I'm afraid it will be forgotten and then we will have to go back to business as usual to do other things and then... I think that is not good. No. And especially since you, and the instrument of the consultation, because it was so positive, so, let it then, that's one reason it should be continued just for that reason, to show: look, the government, the municipality of [Highwater] can consult with entrepreneurs and talk and... it need not even always lead to concrete results, if you can talk to each other and in a nice way."*

Interview George, 11 October 2010

George points here on a different way in which the public savings discourse affects the practice of the Task Force. Not only is the potential of the Taskforce, particularly financial, limited by the public savings, but the Task Force also gets an extra task or role. George says: through the savings there is "the risk as if the economic crisis no longer exists. That it's over and, well, we have done our best and, well, now we go back to 'business as usual'. And continuing the Task Force and continuing the Trend Monitor I think keeps us as a municipality sharp." George points here at the task of the Task Force to keep the awareness of the economic crisis alive. The Task Force should respond to the public savings, and go against the potential impact of the savings that people will feel that investments are no longer needed.

One way or the other: the above fragments clearly show how the public savings discourse strongly influenced the practice of the Taskforce. The national budget cuts and the resulting local cuts have largely determined the developments in the Task Force.

#### 5.1.4 The political discourse and the Task Force

Also other developments than the public savings had an impact on the Task Force. In politics, a lot happened during the period that I followed the Task Force. On 9 June 2010, there were national elections, after which finally on 14 October 2010 a new cabinet was formed. Shortly before the national elections, on 3 March 2010, there had already been elections for the local government. As a result, for example, Alan became the new chairman of the Task Force. After all, he had gotten the portfolio of Economic Affairs in the new college of aldermen. But a year earlier there had

already been a political crisis in Highwater. One of the aldermen had stepped out of the college, so the remaining four aldermen had to re-allocate the portfolios. This was done in January 2009, several months before the Task Force was established. This hectic political discourse also strongly influenced the developments in the Task Force.

5.1.4.1. The establishment of the Task Force from a political crisis in Highwater

In the interview I had with him, George went into these specific political backgrounds, as appears in the following fragment.

*George: "And at some point the city council made those million euros available, based on a proposal from the college of aldermen. The former alderman for Economic Affairs [Joseph] also played an important and prominent role in this. I think he really wanted, as alderman for Economic Affairs, but also as a politician of GroenLinks [a Dutch political party], to show that GroenLinks can also do something else than just squeeze in provisions that affect entrepreneurs. So I think that has played a role for him. Because normally you do not expect that from that party. I think it also played a role in the negotiations for the formation of the college, one way or another, like some kind of change. But that all happened completely out of our sight."*

*Mark: "You mean before the elections?"*

*George: "Yes, or in the formation of the college..."*

*Mark: "Of the new college?"*

*George: "Of the new college, when, like..."*

*Mark: "Okay, yes."*

*George: "...like, we get together and we want to do something together. [Joseph] managed to do this, to actually get 1 million euros, because that is of course quite a lot of money, to get it out of the municipality's purse. And, well, actually that happened without much, with little struggle."*

Interview George, 11 October 2010

George is talking here about the start of the Task Force, in the spring of 2009. The political discourse in Highwater has, according to him, played an important role in this start. The former alderman for Economic Affairs, Joseph, has, according to George, played a major role in the start of the Task Force. According to him, Joseph wanted to "show that GroenLinks can also do something else than just squeeze in provisions that affect entrepreneurs." George is referring here to the political discourse of the political party that Joseph was a member of, GroenLinks. GroenLinks is a political party in the Netherlands that can be characterized as left wing and has a focus on environmental issues. It is not a party that is known as a 'party of entrepreneurs'. George estimates that Joseph wanted to make a statement that he cared for the interests of the entrepreneurs of Highwater. According to him this is the reason why he made such an effort to get the college and the council to give the budget for the Chances Card to the Task Force.

George also refers to the college negotiations, with which he seems to refer to the redistribution of portfolios among the four remaining aldermen after the political crisis of late 2008, early 2009. It

was indeed in that period that the Task Force was established. Obtaining the 1 million euros for the Task Force was, according to George, 'some kind of change' during these college negotiations. Thus, the political background of the alderman and the political turmoil at the time of the start of the Task Force played a significant role in the establishment of the Task Force and the provision of the budget for the Chances Card.

#### 5.1.4.2. The local elections and the Task Force

The influence of political events on the Task Force was also recognized by the external parties. Edward referred to the local elections of 3 March 2010 in the interview I had with him.

*Edward: "But I thought its impact was also decreasing for a while, look, we had elections in March last year. Well, it was just silent for the next half year. Yeah, I think that is just really bad. Because a crisis is today, you know."*

Interview Edward, 18 July 2011

This fragment is about the municipality's influence on the Task Force. Edward thinks the municipality is not very much 'steering', but in this fragment he mentions the impact that developments in the municipality, namely the local elections, have had on the Task Force: "we had elections in March last year. Well, it was just silent for the next half year. Yeah, I think that is just really bad. Because a crisis is today, you know."

#### 5.1.4.3. The national elections and the Task Force

As mentioned, there were national elections shortly after the local elections of 3 March 2010. On 9 June 2010, the national elections were held, and it was not until 14 October 2010 that there actually was a new cabinet. The following fragment is from my report of the meeting of the Task Force on 19 April 2010, almost two months before the elections. It shows how these elections also affected the Task Force.

*[Howard] wanted to continue the meetings. He mentioned that the national elections, with the discussion on the deduction of mortgage interest, could again bring down the housing market. He therefore felt it was important to keep an eye on this.*

Report Task Force meeting (external), 19 April 2010

During this first meeting that I attended, the question was discussed whether the Task Force should even be continued. As this fragment shows, the external members of the Task Force were positive on this. Howard, representative of the association of entrepreneurs, points at the upcoming national elections: "He mentioned that the national elections, with the discussion on the deduction of mortgage interest, could again bring down the housing market. "Harold apparently expects that the national elections, and the new government that would be formed as a result,

could have a great impact on the economic situation, especially the housing market. For that reason, he advocated the provisional continuation of the Task Force.

Also in the interview with Diana, the influence of the national elections is discussed, as appears in the following fragment.

*Mark: "And what do you expect... because the economic crisis was ultimately... uhm... how do you say, the reason why the Task Force was established. What do you expect of its development next year, in that sense?"*

*Diana: "I think it will get better. That most sectors will develop well again and that only the construction sector will indeed fall behind. But that's a little bit the overall picture."*

*Mark: "But next year... it will be better..."*

*Diana: "It will gradually get better again. Yes. That's what I hope."*

*Mark: "And do you expect..."*

*Diana: "Is also depends a little bit on, you know, a new cabinet, what measures will they take, what effect will that have, but..."*

Interview Diana, 10 August 2010

In this fragment, I ask Diana about her expectations of the future development of the economic crisis. She answers, but refers also to the formation of the new cabinet, which at that time was in full swing: "Is also depends a little bit on, you know, a new cabinet, what measures will they take, what effect will that have". Diana also expects that the composition of the new cabinet, and the measures they will take, will have an impact on the economic crisis and thus also on the Task Force.

All in all, political developments of various kinds had a significant influence on the practice of the Task Force in Highwater. Whether it was for the national elections and the formation of the new cabinet or the local elections and the arrival of a new college and a new alderman as chairman of the Task Force, the practice of the Task Force was clearly largely determined by broader and existing political discourses. Several members of the Task Force mentioned these political factors as important elements in the development of the Task Force or of the economic situation. Their discourse, at the level of the Task Force, was thus strongly influenced by this political discourse.

## **5.2 The Task Force of Highwater from an agency perspective**

The story of the Task Force in Highwater from an agency perspective provides a very different result. In this section, I describe how the practice of the Task Force was constructed in the interaction between the various members of the Task Force. The emphasis in this story is much more on the local situation of Highwater, that which makes the Task Force unique and different



from other (perhaps at first sight similar) groups. Through this the power of agency becomes clear: the influence exerted on the practice of the Task Force from the interaction between the individual members of the Task Force.

In this story, I describe the Task Force successively from four different angles, from which the discursive practice of the Task Force in Highwater is recognizable. This story is also built up from several fragments from interviews, reports of meetings of the Task Force and documents.

### 5.2.1 Discursive construction of the state of the local economy

In the Task Force, the state of the local economy was of course one of the main topics that were discussed. The economic crisis and its consequences for Highwater had, after all, been the reason that the Task Force was formed. This speaking about the state of the local economy was a very clear example of discursive practice, in the sense that the members of the Task Force in their mutual interaction constructed a shared sense of the economic crisis.

#### 5.2.1.1. Joint construction following the Trend Monitor

In discussing the state of the local economy, the Trend Monitor played an important role. This was a document, composed by a research company commissioned by the municipality of Highwater, in which some statistics were collected of indicators that were supposed to give an image of the state of the local economy. The discussion of this Trend Monitor was almost at every meeting of the Task Force an item on the agenda. Sometimes it was even the only item on the agenda. The Trend Monitor almost always led to extensive discussions. The following fragment from my report of the meeting of 18 October 2010 shows an example of this.

*The third topic is the Trend Monitor. This is composed by [name of the research company], so [Jim] gives an explanation. He starts by saying that the purpose of the Trend Monitor is to show the local effects of the recession. He stresses that this Trend Monitor does not give any final answers, because it is composed of a limited number of indicators.*

*[...]*

*At the section about Business activity in [High Water] [Jim] indicates that the number of bankruptcies is small and that this has no major impact on employment. Some of the bankrupt companies also start anew. [Alan] asks if we know what happens to the bankrupt entrepreneurs and their employees. [Jim] replies that this is unknown. [Roy] and [Diana] indicate that the municipality only sees these people as they approach the municipality themselves.*

*[Graham] asks whether it is possible to include annual information in this section.*

*[Edward] indicates that the own capital of many businesses is often poor, and that it is therefore more difficult for banks to issue loans. He points to the downward trend in the number of start-up companies, and indicates that he expects that there will be another 'deluge of starters born out of necessity' (promoted by the municipality). He promises that the banks are ready to issue loans.*

*The Trend Monitor shows that the supply of office space has increased. [Jim] emphasizes that this does not always mean that the office space is actually empty. [Sean] asks whether this distinction can be made*

*visible. [Jim] answers that one would need to look at each separate part of property. [Graham] thinks that one cannot see this, but he expects that the buildings are often not empty. [Edward] says that his people do have this information. He indicates that the amount of space per FTE is decreasing and that this is not reflected in the figures. He also points at the distinction between retail and offices. He indicates that there is still demand for retail space, but that the office space above it is often empty: this is hidden vacancy. [Graham] says that the new premises also count, and that they are not yet included in these figures. [Roy] wonders if this is relevant information. [Graham] answers that [name of the association of entrepreneurs] would like to know this. [Roy] wonders if they need to do something with this. [Alan] asks whether it is the responsibility of the municipality. [Edward] replies that it is important information for many municipalities. [Bill] adds that 'the New World of Work' causes a decrease of the space used per FTE. [Alan] asks whether the mentioned retail space is in the city center or beyond. [Jim] replies that it is in the city center. [Edward] responds that many retailers nowadays especially like premises with a lot of façade surface and less depth. This does not fit well with the (old) buildings in the city center that are often narrow and deep. [Graham] concludes that the numbers are not very alarming.*

*For the section Employment and unemployment [Jim] explains that the WWB (Dutch law for social assistance) is going to a rather stable level, though this is not yet the level it was before the crisis started. [Diana] agrees that it is indeed stable again, but that it is worrying that it concerns mainly young people. [Edward] wonders whether there is a relationship with education. [Diana] replies that schools get a lot of money and that they should take the responsibility to keep young people in school longer. [Sean] says that they as Bouwend Nederland are also putting a lot of energy into this problem, but the tide cannot be turned. He believes that municipalities should include educational programs as requirement in their public tenders. He thinks it is a problem that young people in the construction sector are relatively expensive.*

Report Taskforce meeting (external), 18 October 2010

This fragment is fairly typical of how the conversation about the Trend Monitor usually evolved. Jim, as researcher and composer of the Trend Monitor, first got the floor and discussed the various indicators from the Trend Monitor. There were always a few indicators highlighted by the members of the Task Force, which they wanted to discuss further. Often they did this from their own background. They gave some background information to the figures from the Trend Monitor, added to them or corrected them, or asked questions from their own interest. This can also be seen in this fragment. Alan, as a relatively new alderman, asks a question in response to the figures, to which Roy and Diana give an answer from their background of the municipality. Edward adds several times to the information of the Trend Monitor from the knowledge and experience that is available at his bank. Bill provides background information from his broader, regional experience from the Chamber of Commerce. Graham listens to the trends from the information needs of his grassroots, the entrepreneurs. And Jim sometimes gives some additional information from the underlying data of the Trend Monitor. All these different 'voices' in the conversation that come together in the Task Force, construct a more or less shared view on the state of the local economy. Sometimes one of the members also tries to articulate this shared view, by formulating conclusion. This happens also in this fragment by Graham, at the section about the supply of office space, where he concludes that "the numbers are not very alarming". The question is whether

these conclusions were always shared by everyone, but it does indicate that the members of the Task Force themselves experienced these conversations also as a search for a shared meaning of the state of the economy. To such a search, or rather a process of sensemaking or discursive practice, belongs a conclusion that expresses the outcome of the process. Hence these attempts.

In this fragment, there is another element that I would like to emphasize. This is what happens at the beginning, when Jim gets the floor: "He stresses that this Trend Monitor does not give any final answers, because it is composed of a limited number of indicators". This relativization of the meaning of the Trend Monitor by Jim, its composer, is not accidental. In most discussions of the Trend Monitor Jim started with such a remark. This had to do with the discussions that arose several times about the reliability of the Trend Monitor. An example of such a discussion is the following fragment from my report of the first meeting that I attended.

*The Trend Monitor was discussed. [Jim] explained it. It was the fourth and (in principle) the last Monitor. A discussion arose about the observed trends and the sources that were used. [Edward] and [Bill] in particular mentioned that there were often more and/or better sources available, amongst others at their own organizations. They warned for an incomplete and/or incorrect perception about the state of the economic crisis. The discussion was, among other things, about the question whether one should look specifically at the municipality of [Highwater] or that one had to take the region of [name of region] as a reference. In principal, it was agreed at the beginning of the meetings to look only at the municipality of [Highwater]. However, [Edward] pointed out that, for example, many people who live in the municipality of [Highwater] are working at companies just outside of [Highwater]. His opinion was for that certain trends the perception for the municipality of [Highwater] differed from that of the region, and that it was therefore important to agree about the level at which the trends should be measured. In this discussion [Jim] was forced to defend himself. He admitted that often there was only a limited number of sources used and that he was open to alternatives.*

*Also, I noticed that certain trends were underpinned quite poorly. For example, there was a graph with the number of bankruptcies per month. This graph showed numbers between 0 and 5 bankruptcies per month. [Bill] said he knew that for some months there were two bankruptcies instead of 0. This could change the trend significantly.*

Report Taskforce meeting (external), 19 April 2010

During this meeting, there was a heated discussion about the Trend Monitor. The two external members Edward and Bill in particular criticized the Trend Monitor. This criticism was twofold. On the one hand, it was about the focus of the Trend Monitor. The figures that were presented were about the municipality of Highwater. Edward and Bill were both of the opinion that it would be better to collect figures about the region. According to them, the regional trends were more relevant than the local trends. This criticism was probably due to the fact that the two organizations that Edward and Bill represented, a bank and the Chamber of Commerce, also operated more at the regional level. Therefore they had a broader perspective at these issues, and

they also mentioned that they had regional statistics about certain issues. On the other hand, the criticism of Edward and Bill was also focused on the reliability of the sources that were used in the Trend Monitor. They indicated that they sometimes had different statistics that painted quite a different picture. One example is the number of bankruptcies. Bill noted that this number for a particular month was not 0, but at least 2. This would give quite a different picture.

Despite the conversation that Neil apparently had with Jim about the design of the Trend Monitor, this criticism from some external members remained. The criticism was expressed not only at the meetings of the Task Force, but also for example in the email below. This email was sent by Bill to the members of the Task Force, a few days before the meeting of 16 May 2011. In a previous email Bill already had said that he could not be at the meeting, but he still wanted to mention some matters.

*Dear participants Chances Card,*

*Following on the reaction by [Sean] mentioned below I can report that we at the Chamber of Commerce get a lot of signals about the crisis in the construction industry. Good coordination between governments on housing plans can speed up projects and give the industry a boost.*

*I also have some doubts about the Trend Monitor and its conclusions. The scale at which one measures things will influence the trends. For example, the number of start-ups seems to have increased in the past few months in [Highwater], that is not a trend but a snapshot for [Highwater]. At the scale of [name of region], one can see that there is a stable trend of around 100 starters per month with a slight growth in recent months. The explanation may lie in the fact that there are generally more new entrants at the end and the beginning of the year and the question remains whether these start-ups are a sign that the economy in [Highwater] is really doing better. The answer is no. Most start-ups are in fact freelancers that cannot easily get a job and therefore register as a company.*

*I have stated in a previous meeting that it is important to compose the Trend Monitor at a scale of [name of region] with additional trends specific to the municipality of [Highwater]. It surprises me that this has not been done. A final comment about bankruptcies: "350 jobs largely caused by the bankruptcy of [company name]". Is that measured before or after the restart?*

*I wish you a good meeting in advance and I look forward to the answers to my questions.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*[Bill]*

Email prior to meeting Task Force (external) of 16 May 2011, sent on 13 May 2011

This email is interesting because it is a different kind of text than the other fragments that I use in this story about the Task Force in Highwater. It is not a report of a meeting where people are talking together in a group. It is also not an elaboration of an interview where I speak one on one with someone. It is an email in which someone writes down a thought-out message and sends it to the whole group. Bill clearly wants to pass on something to the other members of the Task Force. It is his criticism of the Trend Monitor that he has already expressed in previous meetings, and that he describes again here quite clearly. He chooses a rather sharp tone, as he refers to his earlier plea to compose the Trend Monitor from a regional rather than a local level, and he concludes: "It surprises me that this has not been done". He emphasizes this also from his own knowledge of the region.

#### 5.2.1.2. Construction from the individual backgrounds of the members

The discussion about the Trend Monitor turned out to play a central role in the discursive practice around the state of the local economy. Much time was taken for this discussion and interesting discussions arose in with several members had their say. The criticism of the Trend Monitor that was voiced from some external members showed that the numbers of the Trend Monitor were not taken blindly. From the various backgrounds of the members, information and figures were added, with which one tried to come to a shared image of the local economy. The variation in the backgrounds of the members of the Task Force became clear in some of the interviews that I had. The example below is from the interview with Diana, manager of Social Affairs at the municipality of Highwater.

*Mark: "And you say: we're not there yet, but some parts have peaked. How do you look at the future for that matter? How do you expect it will develop? "*

*Diana: "Well, I think it... it will develop in a positive sense again. And maybe, even if it is economically not completely smashing, because of the aging of the population the labor market demand will probably continue to increase. So it is especially important to keep a good look at where that demand is, or how it develops, and to try to steer based on that. That will be the clue. So in that sense, I think: in terms of the dossiers things will be fine. But the debt problem, that is really a tricky one. Yes."*

Interview Diana, 10 August 2010

At my question about her expectations of the future development of the economy, Diana refers to elements that are important from her background. She specifically mentions "the labor market demand", "the dossiers" (with which she refers to the client dossiers of her own department of Social Affairs) and "the debt problem". These are for her the indicators that show the state of the economy. This could also be seen in the discussions about the Trend Monitor in the meetings of the Task Force. Diana's contributions were especially about those indicators from the Trend Monitor that were about these topics.

Another example of the specific contribution of the various members of the Task Force appeared in the interview with Graham. He was in the Task Force as a representative from the local association of entrepreneurs, but he was himself also an entrepreneur as a consultant for small companies.

*Mark: "In that early period, just at the time of the start of the Task Force, what did you think about the entire economic crisis as it took place then, and what the possible implications might be for [Highwater] and the surrounding area?"*

*Graham: "Well, I've always had a bit of an ambivalent feeling about that. Because, of course it was undeniable that there was a crisis, but on the other hand: I am also, besides, say, representative of the association of entrepreneurs, I am also just an entrepreneur, and I advise a lot of companies and managements, so on the one hand I could simply not deny that there was obviously a crisis, but on the other hand I was also very much concerned with, well, say, the opportunities that it gave for, for example, my clients. Or I saw the passivity of entrepreneurs, who really just did not know what to do. You know, they had for so many years, say, performed a particular trick and that was always fine, and now that things were going worse those entrepreneurs were at their wits end, like: well, what am I supposed to do now? So entrepreneurship was severely tested, so to say, and of course some people have fallen by the wayside. But for others it meant new opportunities. So in general, I saw, of course, yes, there was less investment, so yeah, businesses that depend on investments by other businesses, yes, decisions were delayed and, well, what can you do about it? Still others have a... they cause costs for businesses, so when costs are reduced, whether it's a cleaning business or something else, then you have to face the consequences. So from those two perspectives I had quite ambivalent feelings about what happened."*

*Mark: "Yes, because basically you say: the crisis also had a kind of cleansing effect."*

*Graham: "Every crisis has a cleansing effect. You see that right now also in the construction sector. There, that is very dramatic of course, a kind of ruthless reorganization takes place. But as a whole the industry gets better from this. But how can you say that to the people who are now..."*

*Mark: "Yes, of course."*

*Graham: "...who now, so to say, find themselves unemployed. You know, or entrepreneurs who have gone bankrupt and who feel the scars of this. But the industry itself will get stronger over time. And you can also see that in a lot of companies that, say, instead of going into a crisis negatively, they enter the crisis positively, saying: yes, what's in it for me? And what, what opportunities emerge? And I believe that the economy, or the economic crisis, has initiated a structural change in, say, the economic events. And that is that it's developing much more from a supply-driven economy to a demand-driven economy. And a lot of companies still have a lot of trouble adopting to this."*

Interview Graham, 7 March 2011

Graham describes here the economic crisis from a different perspective than what usually happened in the Task Force. Whereas usually the crisis was described as a problem to be solved as quickly as possible, Graham saw positive elements to the crisis. He talks about a "cleansing effect" of the crisis and says about the bankruptcies that are taking place: "as a whole the industry gets

better from this". It is these experiences, that Graham has as an entrepreneur, that he also takes with him into the Task Force.

The discourse about the state of the local economy is in the Task Force clearly formed in the interaction between different members, who bring different vocabularies. The Trend Monitor, with its statistical data, is an important source for the discussion within the Task Force, but also the information from Edward and Bill, from their regional perspective, is introduced. There are also other approaches, such as that of Diana from the perspective of social security and Graham who looks more from an entrepreneurial perspective. All these contributions from different vocabularies shape the discursive practice in the Task Force about the state of the local economy.

### 5.2.2 The activities of the Task Force (Chances Card)

At the start, the Task Force had gotten a budget from the council of Highwater to take concrete actions to mitigate the consequences of the economic crisis. These activities were identified and included in a list: the Chances Card. Also about this Chances Card there was a discursive practice, both at the start of the Chances Card and later at the evaluation and the identification of new activities.

#### 5.2.2.1. The start of the Chances Card

I did not participate in the Task Force at the start of the Chances Card. When I started to follow the Task Force most of the activities were already started or completed and the evaluation had started. However, in the interviews I discussed the start of the Chances Card with some members of the Task Force.

*When devising measures against the crisis, the Task Force looked for measures that could do something about those factors that might deepen the crisis in [Highwater]. They did not want to respond to broader trends that played everywhere, but to those things that could have a specific local impact. They wanted to take measures here, even though it was drops in the ocean. They thought of it as a task of the municipality, but they also wanted to send a signal that the municipality was concerned with its citizens and businesses, and that the municipality was willing to help.*

Report interview Roy, 14 June 2010

Roy sketches in this fragment the start of the Chances Card. Hereby he mentions a search among members of the Task Force. The Chances Card is, according to him, really a list that was composed jointly by the different members of the Task Force, both the municipality and the external partners. He stresses: "They did not want to respond to broader trends that played everywhere, but to those things that could have a specific local impact." Roy presents the Chance Card as a list of activities that are very specific to Highwater. Although there were also differences in the contributions of the

various parties to the Chances Card, it was something that they composed together. It was in the interaction within the Task Force that the set of measures on the Chances Card was composed.

Diana also described the start of the Chances Card in the interview I had with her.

*Mark: "And there are various measures that were listed on the Chances Card. How did that happen? Was it indeed a small group, or..."*

*Diana: "No, there was an inventory. This was held in particular by the secretary, by [George], and was just presented each time and then we discussed the state of affairs with those proposals..."*

*Mark: "And members could come up with ideas themselves, that then came on that list?"*

*Diana: "Yes, in principle, they could add things to it, but I believe there has not been added much more to it. In the end, it is what was already there, added with some small initiatives that..."*

*Mark: "But the inventory that was done by [George], those were ideas that were proposed by the municipality..."*

*Diana: "Proposed, yes. From different departments."*

*Mark: "Okay. So the external members have played a relatively minor role in this."*

*Diana: "They watched, commented and said: well, good idea or not, or I would like take part in that discussion. One of the examples was that the club of entrepreneurs, for example, looked at the municipality's procurement policy, because there was a lot of criticism, particularly from those entrepreneurs: the municipality makes it all difficult and they are combining everything so that we as local entrepreneurs cannot participate in tenders. So that way, they watched at our procurement policy, like, what could you do about that? Well, then specialists say: we have to do this according to the rules, and entrepreneurs say: it can be done quite differently. But in itself, they worked together to see: well, can you do something, in the context of the crisis, to adapt the procurement policy so that local entrepreneurs get more opportunities."*

Interview Diana, 10 August 2010

Diana also describes the start of the Chances Card as an interactive process. But like Roy she also says that the municipality came up with most of the ideas. This had not only to do with the attitude of the external parties, but especially with the fact that the municipality clearly took the initiative: "there was an inventory. This was held in particular by the secretary, by [George], and was just presented each time and then we discussed the state of affairs with those proposals...". So the municipality had its own inventory and the results were discussed with the external parties. Still Diana mentions that the external parties also interfered with the composing of the Chances Card. She mentions the example of the municipality's procurement policy, of which the entrepreneurs felt that it offered too little opportunities for local entrepreneurs. This was discussed in depth in the Task Force: "then specialists say: we have to do this according to the rules, and entrepreneurs say: it can be done quite differently. But in itself, they worked together to see: well, you can you do something, in the context of the crisis, to adapt the procurement policy so that local entrepreneurs get more opportunities". Overall, the start of the Chances Card clearly has



been a discursive process, in which the municipality was perhaps the most important party, but in which also the other parties contributed.

In the interview with George this subject also came up. He also emphasized the cooperative character of the Task Force, also specifically with respect to the activities of the Chances Card.

*Mark: "You already told something about, say, the dynamics within the Task Force, you know, how people act are and how people, well, do or do not interfere in the discussions. Have there been over the past, the past, well, during the existence of the Task Force, have there been any discussions in which people, where you noticed: there are different opinions or interests involved, or...?"*

*George: "No, I have not experienced that. Those to whom we asked to deliver something obviously came up with their own products, but there has never been anything like, which you could have imagined, you know, that people would go to their own alderman outside the Task Force. Like, I have such a good proposal and that costs for example 5 tons, well, that's too bad that other things can not be effected, but if only my proposal can proceed. Well, I have, that has never occurred, no. People had, really, quite well thought through to what the money could be spent. Well prepared, those proposals, in general. And then they came in the Task Force, and then a decision was demanded and, well, if it was positive they were happy and if it was not so positive then they were disappointed. Then they had to get over this, but then it was also over and the next time they just came up with new proposals."*

*Mark: "Yes, because in that consideration, who was, decisive or who...?"*

*George: "Well, not one person, or even two people. I have always experienced that as the total of the Task Force that came to a decision, like: that's a good thing to do or not to do. It was always that open and honest. Yes."*

Interview George, 11 October 2010

George is quite positive here about the cooperation within the Task Force, especially with respect to the Chances Card. According to him the composition of the Chances Card was really a cooperative activity, even though the proposals came from several individual members: "I have always experienced that as the total of the Task Force came to a decision, like: that's a good thing to do or not to do. It was always that open and honest".

#### 5.2.2.2. Evaluation of the Chances Card

As said before, at the time that I started my research at the Task Force, a first evaluation of the Chances Card had begun. In several meetings of the Task Force this issue was discussed, and also in the interviews I looked back on the activities of the Chances Card with the members of the Task Force. I did this also with Neil in the following fragment.

*Neil: "And also further on, well, you have, you have also been at some of the discussions with the entrepreneurs?"*

Mark: *"One, one so far."*

Neil: *"Okay. Well, it leads to so little. Always the usual attitude. Always a little bit of an attitude like: it is too late or you do nothing or... I must say, like... what is positive is that anyway, well, the procurement policy, here internally, which I think is the gain, one is once again going to reconsider it. Because we have here a trauma of the construction fraud affair. It was still very strong in the previous college of aldermen, because there were a few aldermen who had experienced it all, just like the city manager. And, well, then you get such an exorbitant response, so to say. And because of that the purchasing and procurement policy was completely boarded up. And now it has been loosened a little, in order to use it with some flexibility. And I must say, [Graham] was also quite committed to realize that. So a number of times this has been discussed, so in that sense..."*

Mark: *"To provide more opportunities for the local entrepreneurs, I believe, right? That's pretty much the..."*

Neil: *"Yes. Exactly. Yes, that was the essence of the story. Yes. And not to combine it all, so that it was indeed manageable for smaller parties. Yes. Yes, I have to mention that as a positive development, absolutely."*

Interview Neil, 11 October 2010

Neil is quite negative about the Task Force. This is quite obvious from the interview that I had with him, and especially also in this fragment. Yet, looking back, he sees a positive development in the Chances Card. He thinks the relaxation of the municipality's purchasing and procurement policy is a good development. This development was caused by the Chances Card and "[Graham] was also quite committed to realize that. So a number of times this has been discussed". Neil is describing here the discursive practice that has developed on this subject, initiated especially by Graham. Because of the discussions in the Task Force the municipality's policy has indeed changed, and this is according to Neil a positive example.

In my interviews with external partners, Graham and Edward, the Chances Card also came up. In the following fragment, Edward looks back on the activities that the Task Force has undertaken.

Edward: *"And, well, what I think of as a positive experience, you know, but that was not just because of the Chances Card, but because we were at that table, that getting a hotel complex to [Highwater], and [name of the project], ultimately started derived from the Chances Card. It only never was specifically mentioned there. That's OK by me. But then you see, well, not everyone at the table will recognize that there is a number of things that really have been put in motion there."*

Mark: *"Yeah, so those are mostly things that that did not follow the formal process..."*

Edward: *"No."*

Mark: *"...via such a Chances Card, but that really can be derived from it."*

Edward: *"Yeah, so [Roy], we met at that table, he was thinking: gosh. So two months later he was sitting at my table: how can we do something? And we as a financier, or with a company that wanted to come, which was a very complicated case for the municipality of [Highwater], we eventually did accomplish something. That was ultimately caused in the network of the Chances Card. Well, that is*

*always very hard to characterize, but I dare say, but it could not be on the Chances Card. But once the hotel is built, perhaps, without anyone noticing, two, three, it will be caused for seventy percent by the Chances Card."*

Interview Edward, 18 July 2011

Edward mentions a positive example of an activity of the Task Force. Interestingly, this is not an activity that actually was the responsibility of the Task Force or that was also the Chances Card. Edward has a broader perspective and is looking here also at activities that were caused indirectly by the Task Force or were affected by it. He says: "That was ultimately caused in the network of the Chances Card". This "network" is less explicit and according to Edward, not everyone can always see how something came about or what affected what, but in this case it is, "without anyone noticing", "caused for seventy percent by the Chances Card". This network is a clear example of the discursive practice of the Task Force. Because the various members met within the Task Force and talked about issues on the economic situation of Highwater, they constructed a reality in which they came to concrete actions. These were, very directly, the activities that were on the Chances Card, but also other activities that were started indirectly linked to the Task Force.

#### 5.2.2.3. The development of new activities

As mentioned, in several Task Force meetings the Chances Card was evaluated. Here also new activities were discussed. In the following fragment, this happened in an internal meeting of the Task Force, with only the representatives from the municipality of Highwater.

*Item 3 on the agenda is the status of the Chances Card. A table with the state of the reserve 'stimulation fund economic crisis' is attached. [Roy] indicates that [Diana] has said to him on the phone that morning that all the money will be spent. However, a decision must be made about what money should be reserved for 2011. For this new ideas are needed. [Neil] asks about the status of the mortgage for starters. For this € 150,000 was reserved. [Roy] answers that this initiative failed, and that probably € 140,000 will remain. [Roy] says that he has heard from [Diana] that the microcredit can be continued. [Neil] indicates the proportion of the measures in the construction sector. Often the image is that much is being done here, but it is only 6% (it is unclear to me where this percentage comes from). [George] says that [name of the manager of Projectmanagement] has indicated that the [name of a new neighborhood] and the [name of a research] could be possible projects. [Roy] responds that it is good that ideas for the construction sector are mentioned, but that it is important that these are concrete ideas. [Neil] responds that it might be good to make an own list. [Roy] asks [George] and [Neil] to get [Diana] to come up with ideas and to ask [name of the manager of Projectmanagement] to give concrete examples of his ideas. If this fails it means "the end".*

Report Task Force meeting (internal), 20 September 2010

This fragment shows how new activities were discussed in the internal meetings of the Task Force. Hereby people looked within the municipality what further actions could be possible, linked to the various policy areas and departments of the municipality. Quite the same as at the composition of

the Chances Card, ideas for new activities were clearly prepared by the representatives of the municipality. Roy plays a leading role in this, but there are also many ideas from Diana and her Social Services department. Neil and George have an important role in collecting and elaborating the ideas.

During the external meeting following this internal meeting, the new activities that the Task Force could undertake are also discussed. The conversation about this is described in the following fragment.

*Item 6 deals with the status of the Chances Card. [Roy] explains that the activities are 'finished' and that right now a report has to be made for the city council. There is still 2.5 to 3.5 tons left. Until now, there have been proposed few concrete new measures. He mentions two of them. The first is to stimulate work placements in the [name of new neighborhood]. This would cost 1.5 to 2 tons. [Sean] responds that in Amsterdam there are examples of this. The second example [Roy] mentions is the continuation of the measures in the field of microcredit. The initial budget for this was € 80,000, so the second budget would be also something like this.*

*[Graham] asks whether there has been any contact about the service center for start-ups and freelancers. He believes that this could be supported partly from the Chances Card. [Roy] indicates that not much is known, and that there should be a concrete proposal soon. He calls on everyone to come up with detailed proposals soon. [George] adds that there are three other proposals: the restoration of the gardeners' chimney in [name of a village in the municipality], the restoration of the building in [name of street], and a contribution to [name of an event in Highwater]. [Sean] says that he had mentioned a small project with work placements. [Roy] says that the detailed proposals must be handed in to [George] by November 1. [Sean] responds that he still has a proposal about energy that he can hand in that same afternoon. [Roy] says that there must be some alignment between the projects.*

Report Task Force meeting (external), 18 October 2010

In this fragment, it is clear that Roy takes the lead. He starts by mentioning the proposals that are already there. These proposals have already been discussed in the internal meeting and are now presented in the external meeting. Some external members respond to this, including Graham and Sean. They also put forward their own proposals. Roy deals with this a little ambiguously. On the one hand he is a little reluctant, when he indicates that there has to be a check whether the proposals fit into the totality of activities. However, on the other hand, he also emphasized the importance of the other parties coming up with detailed proposals. All in all, this fragment shows that there are many proposals for activities and that the discussion also leads to new ideas. These discussions in the Task Force, as in the composition of the original Chances Card, seem to lead to concrete activities of the Task Force. This is a clear example of discursive practice, where the interaction between the members of the Task Force leads to a shared discourse about the activities to be undertaken. This discursive practice affects subsequently, through the activities undertaken, the context of the Task Force.

### 5.2.3 The discursive function of the Task Force

The discursive practice of the Task Force also clearly turns out when the function of the Task Force is discussed. This function has been discussed several times during the meetings of the Task Force and also during my interviews with members of the Task Force.

#### 5.2.3.1. The external signaling function

The following fragment is from the interview I had with Diana, the manager of Social Affairs of the municipality of Highwater.

*Mark: "Because, I heard, I think it was in one of the meetings that it was discussed, the role of the Task Force, rather than materially, because with a million, well, you can do only a limited number of things, but that also the image of the Task Force plays an important role. Showing as a municipality..."*

*Diana: "We are doing something."*

*Mark: "We are doing something, we take the crisis seriously and we try to do something for our citizens. How do these things relate to each other, you think, if you look at the Task Force?"*

*Diana: "Yes. Well, let's say, for me at least the result has been that I have been able to increase my capacity at the frontline, so I really have been able to contribute to the crisis. And of course we have also started the training center in [name of a town]. Well, that leads directly to job vacancies at [name of a company/institution], so that also helps. So on the one hand, it is very concrete results, and on the other hand, it is indeed also just the fact that you can say as a municipality: we are doing something."*

*Mark: "Yes. And what is the importance of that? Can you say something more about it?"*

*Diana: "That is partly the image, which helps in the collaboration with your partners. Yes, if entrepreneurs feel: the municipality is doing at least something, you know, and whether you are always doing the right things... (laughs), but doing nothing is fatal, you know, that's a little (laughs)... And then you can at least discuss with one another whether that's the right thing or not and... so, yes, I do think that is indeed valuable. Especially because there was a lot of criticism from the entrepreneurs especially towards the previous college of aldermen. That they felt like little or nothing was done. Yes."*

*Mark: "Yes. So there was indeed imaging to those external parties, not only broader, but..."*

*Diana: "Yes, I think that the average citizen of [Highwater] is not following the developments of the Chances Card. Look, at the start it is mentioned in the newspaper, and in between do send proposals to the city council and then occasionally it is mentioned, but the average citizen will not have thought: well, the municipality has really done a great job with that Chances Card. But for the parties involved... I think it has had an effect. Yes. And for their grassroots."*

Interview Diana, 10 August 2010

Diana mentions here the function of the Task Force. This function is twofold: "on the one hand, it is very concrete results, and on the other hand, it is indeed also just the fact that you can say as a municipality: we are doing something." As concrete results Diana mentions some activities of the

Task Force that clearly led to something concrete. But the second function is perhaps more interesting. This function, showing as a municipality that you are doing something, is for Diana primarily focused on the other members of the Task Force. Specifically to the entrepreneurs it must be shown that the municipality actively tries to do something about the economic crisis. "That is partly the image, which helps in the collaboration with your partners." This is clearly a discursive function that Diana sees for the Task Force: in the interaction between the municipality and the entrepreneurs a reality of an active municipality is constructed.

This discursive function of the Task Force, which Diana considers as primarily focused on the entrepreneurs within the Task Force, also comes back in other meetings and interviews. Only then it is often the discursive function of the Taskforce towards the 'outside': towards the society of Highwater. This is for example discussed in the interview with George.

*Mark: "And how was at that time, say at the time when you joined, at that time, how did you look at, well, more generally, the economic crisis and its impact on the municipality and also the initiative of something like a Task Force? How did you look at that yourself?"*

*George: "Well, I was already involved in that consultation with Bouwend Nederland. And from there the signals came already: well, the construction industry is not doing well, and this could also have consequences for [name of region] in particular. So the idea was that as a government, generally speaking, you should show that you see this. This alone can already help to, let's say, well, you can not prevent all effects, or negative impacts from happening, but you can still show to entrepreneurial Holland that you indeed see this and that you want to be in some way a back support. Because the economic crisis is obviously partly also about consumer confidence and, well, once that is decreasing or entrepreneurs start complaining about: well, we as entrepreneurs are trying to get through all this as good as possible, but we don't hear anything from the government. Well, that does not help of course. So in that sense, I always thought it was a very good thing that the municipality played an active role. And in part it was of course money that we were already planning to spend, you know, because there was already a budget for tourism, but, well, then it is more about the signaling function of: how you market it? Is it like: well, we already did that, or do you say: we labeled it very specifically and we show that we want to help beat the economic crisis."*

*Mark: "Yes. And you say... signaling function, you already said it yourself. So at least towards the entrepreneurs. And on the other hand also... You mentioned consumer confidence, that is also important. Was it also the intention to... well, to affect that, so to say, to give a positive signal to the consumer in [Highwater]?"*

*George: "Yeah, I think so. Whether it is always the consumers, or maybe... look, the people who work at those companies, they are also our citizens. And when you show that you somehow try to, in any way whatsoever, help businesses to survive, then you immediately also do something to those who work there and to your own citizens. So, well, when they then regain some confidence: well, the government helps, and: I keep my job, or: the probability that I keep my job is slightly larger, then they might spend just a little bit more in another shop that also has a hard time, and then... well, in that sense, it is of course, well, reciprocally."*

Interview George, 11 October 2010

George also speaks about the discursive function of the Task Force. He himself talks about the "signaling function". "So the idea was that as a government, generally speaking, you should show that you see this. This alone can help to [...] show to entrepreneurial Holland that you indeed see this and that you want to be in some way a back support." The fact that the municipality starts a Task Force and speaks to representatives of entrepreneurs about the consequences of the economic crisis, gives the signal to entrepreneurs that the municipality cares about the problems of entrepreneurs. This can also lead quote concretely to an improvement in the economic situation in Highwater, as George shows with an example about consumer confidence of the employees of local businesses: "when they regain some confidence: well, the government helps, and: I keep my job, or: the probability that I keep my job is slightly larger, then they might spend just a little bit more in another shop that also has a hard time, and then... well, in that sense, it is of course, well, reciprocally." In this sense, the Task Force may, without doing concrete activities themselves, affect the economic situation in Highwater.

This signaling function of the Task Force was not only mentioned by George. Others, too, were aware of this function of the Taskforce. In the following fragment, the subject is also discussed.

*Mark: "Was there then from the start a clear goal, of which you said: well, there, because of this we are here together, this is what we are going to do together?"*

*Neil: "Ehhh...For me it was, the goal was clear."*

*Mark: "Namely? How would you describe it?"*

*Neil: "Well, that... we actually sat together on the one hand to keep each other informed about the situation in the field, and yet to constantly scan what we could do with this, but in addition it was primarily meant to send a signal: entrepreneurs, we are working on it and we are doing what we can. Just this signaling. That was also said several times, like: yes, that is what we are actually talking about. And the rest is of course in the margin."*

*Mark: "But that was said in the internal meetings, I suppose, but also in the external meetings, with the external parties?"*

*Neil: "Yes, yes, yes."*

Interview Neil, 11 October 2010

Neil also mentions a dual function of the Task Force: "on the one hand to keep each other informed about the situation in the field, and yet to constantly scan what we could do with this, but in addition it was primarily meant to send a signal: entrepreneurs, we are working on it and we are doing what we can. Just this signaling". The signaling function of the Task Force was also to Neil apparently an important function. And it was, according to him, regularly discussed in the Task Force, so it was no secret that this was one of the goals.

#### 5.2.3.2. Mutual awareness

In the interview with Graham the discursive function of the Task Force also came up, though he put it slightly differently. According to Graham it was not so much about a signaling function to the outside, but more to raise awareness amongst the parties involved.

*Graham: "And, look, the ultimate effect of that Task Force is, I think, at least, say, a kind of awareness, you know, so you just, based on the information that the Task Force generates and the reports that we have, you are at least quite aware of what is going on, and so you are also much more able to respond to it. And that happens in a direct sense, but also indirectly."*

*Mark: "Yes. And this awareness, this is primarily for those who are at the table, so to say, the different members...?"*

*Graham: "Yes, plus of course their constituencies. Because one way or another, with that information you can do things. So you take it with you to your own organizations. And at least for us it has for example led to the fact that we, you know, because we had just introduced that advertising tax in order to get money to develop initiatives, structurally, to stimulate the economy, so that naturally reinforced each other. And that is also, that has been a major boost, I think."*

Graham Interview, 7 March 2011

Graham also points to a specific function of the Task Force: "awareness, you know, so you just, based on the information that the Task Force generates and the reports that we have, you are at least quite aware of what that is going on, and so you are also much more able to respond to it. And that happens in a direct sense, but also indirectly". This awareness, and the way Graham describes it, clearly has a discursive character. Through the interaction in the Task Force a social reality is constructed by the members. One becomes "aware" of the economic crisis and as a consequence actions are undertaken.

#### 5.2.4 The interaction between the members of the Task Force

In the Task Force in Highwater discussions were not only about the function that this group had, focused on the economic situation, and the activities they undertook. In part, it was also about less substantive issues. A topic that was for example discussed quite often was the interaction between the different parties in the Task Force. The way they cooperated, or did that too little, was a constant subject of discussion. In fact, it was a discourse in itself.

##### 5.2.4.1. The dominance of the municipality

In the interaction between the municipality and the external parties it was clear that the municipality was seen as the most influential party. First, this had to do with the fact that the municipality was clearly broader represented at the meetings than the other parties. At the first meeting I attended, on 19 April 2010, I wrote in my report the following observation.



*I noticed that there were relatively many people from the municipality and few representatives of external parties. The latter were all alone, while the municipality was represented by many people. I had the idea that this made it seem as if the external parties were visitors at the municipality, and that the Task Force was mainly an initiative of the municipality in which others could join. It did not come across as a joint initiative.*

Report Task Force meeting (external), 19 April 2010

Also the members of the Task Force saw this mutual relationship of course. This was not so much discussed among themselves, but for example in the interview with Edward it was mentioned.

*Mark: "And when you look at the time when you joined the Task Force, how, what was the goal to which they strove to your idea?"*

*Edward: "Well, that was the first time I got minutes, I thought: 1) poorly organized. I just, twice I just did not get documents, then I did get documents. "Yeah, I did not know if you had been asked already." Yeah, guys, I mean, organize it, please. You know, so organizationally I found it poorly organized in the beginning, let me put it that way. It struck me that in the beginning indeed, from the municipality there were quite a few officials, including aldermen, which I then just.. supplemented with people. And the overkill of municipal officials was initially greater than the business vision, so to speak."*

Interview Edward, 18 July 2011

Edward speaks in this fragment even of an "overkill of municipal officials". Although he does not say it literally, he seems not to appreciate this.

#### 5.2.4.2. The different contributions of individual members

Besides the fact that the municipality was broader represented than the other parties, and also played a more central role, also the contribution of the individual members was important. The way in which individuals filled out their role in the Task Force was also strongly influential for the discursive practice within the Task Force. The contribution of some of the individual members of the Task Force was mentioned in several interviews. This happened for example in the following fragment from the interview with George.

*Mark: "Can you say something, say, from that early period until... well, just about now, what have been the main developments in the Task Force, so in terms of activities, in terms of composition, in terms of meetings or how they evolved?"*

*George: "Yes. Well, I guess that from the start, at least that is my idea, we had of course also a change of the college of aldermen in between, and [Joseph], the former alderman for Economic Affairs, was also a very enthusiastic man. And also an enthusing man who also challenged people, and who always came into the meetings fresh and cheerful at 9am in the morning. And then: well, we are going to make something of it. And that has set the tone for the meetings with, well, I've never actually internally, there has actually never been a crossword or disappointment I think, like... well,*

*that could also have happened, that someone tries to score off someone else. I think, in my experience, it is always been in very good harmony and in all openness and honesty that those proposals have been put forward and discussed by all, well, experts and non-experts, and then it came to a good advice. And the meetings with the externals have also always been good, in my view. And... well, there is of course a number of people, but that can be also because of the specific person... one person says more than another, you know, the man from the [name of the local bank], well, he gives solicited and unsolicited advice, and... for [name of the association of entrepreneurs] joined later of course, and in my experience the people from the Employee Insurance Agency and the [name of the local bank] and later the Chamber of Commerce also joined of course, those are people, those were just the right people probably who... well... of course you can only ask, you know, in such a meeting, like: I want this and I want that. But those were people who often also gave something back from their own knowledge and skills, and who saw: I would do it this way or I would do it that way. And that, I thought that was very positive. And I must say, in particular from the side of the [name of the association of entrepreneurs], the input has actually been quite little, yes, quite little."*

Interview George, 11 October 2010

George refers in this fragment on the one hand to the role of Joseph, the former alderman for Economic Affairs and the first chairman of the Task Force. His enthusiasm was, according to George, defining for the interaction within the Task Force. On the other hand, George also points to the role of some other persons. He specifically mentions Edward, from the local bank, as someone who played an active role in the Task Force. The other person he explicitly mentions is Graham, from the local association of entrepreneurs. He had, according to George, only little input.

That the impression about who had an active participation can also vary by person is evident from the following fragment from the interview with Neil.

*Mark: "And the meetings with the external parties, how did you experience these dynamics?"*

*Neil: "Well, little dynamics."*

*Mark: "No debate or disagreements?"*

*Neil: "No, well, if there was some debate then it was always...What I thought of as a meaningful discussion and constructive, then it came from the bank and from [Graham]."*

*Mark: "Okay."*

*Neil: "Yes."*

*Mark: "But then it was indeed primarily an addition, it was not that much debate or disagreement arose?"*

*Neil: "Well, there sometimes was discussion about how you could see the different sides of a proposal. That was then exposed more and..."*

*Mark: "And did you then also see that there were parties who were at a certain point the decisive factor?"*

*Neil: "No. No."*

*Mark: "That went all in good consideration."*

Neil: *"That went, in fact, in good consideration and you could see at a certain point also that in such a group, well, there are two persons that are being heard and the rest, well, when they say something, then, well, then it is just taken note of. And those were [Edward] and [Graham], they were the only two who, when they said something then it was heard, so to speak."*

Mark: *"Yes. Okay."*

Neil: *"Yes, I have described the group quickly like that. I think it was like that (laughs)."*

Interview Neil, 11 October 2010

Although Neil denies here that there were some people in the Task Force who were "the decisive factor", he mentions two people who were "heard" and of whom it could be said that "when they said something then it was heard". The first of these two people is Edward, who was also mentioned by George as an important person in the Task Force as well. The second person is Graham. This is remarkable, because George had said that Graham had little input. This shows that it can vary per individual which person or persons are seen as 'decisive', 'present' or 'influential'. The expectations that people have of a person, or previous experiences with someone, can also play a role.

#### 5.2.4.3. Discussion within the Task Force

Within the Task Force there were regularly discussions on specific topics. Here the discursive practice was very explicitly visible. The contributions of the different members of the Task Force were very concrete. A good example of differences of opinion within the Task Force can be seen in the following fragment. This is the last meeting of the Task Force that I attended, on 16 May 2011.

*The fourth chapter of the Trend Monitor is 'Construction and housing'. The first few indicators of this chapter (revenues from construction fees, issued building permits, finished new-build houses) are hardly discussed. About the indicator 'housing supply' [Jim] says that this remains high. [Edward] responds that he thinks the regulations about the interest-only mortgage are worrying. Young people can hardly get a mortgage, which leads to a social issue: what will these young people do? He refers to the generation of the early 70s and warns: pay attention to the youth! [Roy] responds that the emails from [Bill] and [Sean] which they sent prior to the meeting are also about this problem. He proposes to submit this issue to the VVRE (a regional consultation of the aldermen for Traffic & transport, Housing, Spatial planning and Economic affairs of 9 [regional] municipalities). [Graham] responds that the VVRE is not the most decisive body. [Roy] responds to this that the pressure should come from the entrepreneurs. [Edward] agrees to this. He mainly thinks that developers should cooperate more, they are operating quite soloist. The reactions of [Graham] and [Roy] appear to me as somewhat fierce and vicious. It seems like [Graham] wants to criticize the municipality by calling the VVRE 'indecisive' and like [Roy] tries to counterattack this by criticizing the 'entrepreneurs'. [Edward] seems to be unaware of this, but his more substantive response makes the tension below the surface disappear.*

*The indicator 'asking price of houses' shows a slight decline. [Jim] explains that this is mainly due to declines in the expensive segment. [Edward] says that he recognizes this trend. He sees in the expensive segment in the region (more than € 400,000) declines of up to 20%. He mentions an example of a house that had been*

*for sale for € 1.2 million, the asking price had dropped to € 8 tons, and eventually the house has been sold for € 740,000. According to him this sets a trend. He also mentions a positive message: the benchmark of the [name of local bank] of March 2011 shows [Highwater] as 'white raven': it is the only region to show an increase. He indicates that this may be incidentally, but it seems to give a positive picture. He mentions another positive image, namely the increase of savings. However, from an economic perspective this is worrying, because it means that investments stay behind. [Graham] responds: "And yet the interest rate rises...". [Roy] asks why this happens. [Edward] replies with a rather financially technical answer. It seems to me that the other members of the Task Force do not quite understand it, but take it to be true. I have the idea that they respect [Edward] a lot and that they quickly take to be true whatever he says. [Alan] concludes this part by saying: "We are going further. [Edward], hold on to the positive things!"*

Report Task Force meeting (external), 16 May 2011

During this meeting, the Trend Monitor was discussed. A rather acrid conversation starts between Roy from the municipality and Graham from the local association of entrepreneurs. Already during the meeting I noticed this and I therefore wrote it down in the report that I made of the meeting: "The reactions of [Graham] and [Roy] appear to me as somewhat fierce and vicious. It seems like [Graham] wants to criticize the municipality by calling the VVRE 'indecisive' and like [Roy] tries to counterattack this by criticizing the 'entrepreneurs'". This shows the sometimes difficult relationship between the municipality and the external parties, especially Graham from the local association of entrepreneurs. Also Edward's role becomes clear, as his input is appreciated by most members. He eases the tension between Roy and Graham, though one might wonder whether he does this deliberately. Later in this fragment his role in the Task Force again becomes clear. On account of the Trend Monitor a question is raised about the development of the interest rate, and Edward answers based on his expertise as a bank manager. However, this response is quite technical, and already during the meeting I have the impression that most members do not really understand the answer. My observation therefore is, as written in the report: "I have the idea that they respect [Edward] a lot and that they quickly take to be true whatever he says".

The conclusion about the interaction between the municipality and the external parties is that the municipality is the dominant party. This primarily has to do with the number of representatives in the Task Force. The other parties are each represented by only one person, but the municipality has a lot more representatives. In addition, both the chairman (Alan formally, informally often Roy) and the secretary (George) are from the municipality, which means that the municipality sets the agenda and writes the report. The meetings of the Task Force are also always held in the town hall, which gives the impression that the external members are guests of the municipality. So it is not surprising that the external parties see the municipality as the most influential party. Nevertheless, the external parties also have their input. Two people, in particular, draw attention. Graham is the one who often takes a fairly critical role towards the municipality. This may be a consequence of his formal role, as a representative of the local entrepreneurs, but it also seems to

be related to his personal character. The second person that plays a prominent role in the Task Force is Edward. Although he does not represent a clearly definable group of people based on his formal role, as the director of a local bank, he plays quite an active role. Several members of the Task Force mention him as a key figure in the Task Force, and it seems, through his expertise and engagement in the Task Force, that he gets a lot of respect. He is hereby also quite influential in the discursive practice in the Task Force, because what he says is often taken quite seriously by the other members.

### ***5.3 Findings of power through structure and agency in Highwater***

The central question of this research is: "How do municipalities with their partners make sense of the economic crisis?". The two stories about the Task Force in Highwater provide some interesting findings about how this discursive process in this municipality evolved. Because of the two separate stories, the distinction between power that was exercised through discourse-in-practice (structure) and power that was exercised through discursive practice (agency) becomes quite clear. At the same time, the two stories show the interconnectedness of the structure and the agency perspective.

#### ***5.3.1 The discourse on the state of the economy is shaped both by statistical data and personal interests and backgrounds***

The Task Force in Highwater used to a large extent statistical data to make sense of the economic crisis. The Trend Monitor, based partly on the COEN (Survey of the Economic Climate in the Netherlands), played a major role in the Task Force. Much time was taken to discuss these figures, sometimes this was even the only item on the agenda of the meeting. The discourse within the Task Force on the state of the economy was thus strongly influenced by these figures. Although there was regular discussion about the accuracy of the figures and / or contents of the Trend Monitor, it was still considered the primary instrument to measure the state of the economy. At times this was supported by other external sources, such as news articles.

The stories about the Task Force in Highwater, in this case the one from a structure perspective, show how the Task Force relied strongly on external information in their sensemaking process about the meaning of the economic crisis. They searched for external frameworks to guide their own sensemaking process. These frameworks were mainly found in the apparent objectivity of statistical data and trends that were deduced by an external research company. This search for external and (apparent) objective frameworks seems to be related to the character of the economic crisis. Earlier I referred to Weick (1995), who emphasized that sensemaking predominantly occurs in shock situations, when people are faced with an abundance of information, with complexity or with turbulence (large and/or heavy changes). The economic crisis

was certainly such a shock situation, in which new meanings were needed. The people in Highwater relied for these new meanings strongly on external information from statistical data.

The interesting thing is that the role of statistical data is also mentioned in my story about Highwater from an agency perspective. The statistical data from the Trend Monitor did not present an instant meaning of the economic crisis. The data were used in the discursive practice that took place in the Task Force. The Trend Monitor was discussed often and quite thoroughly during the meetings of the Task Force. However, some indicators from the Trend Monitor were hardly discussed and did not quite get the attention of the members of the Task Force. Often, people responded from their own background to those subjects that they knew a lot of or that they had a lot to do with. A clear example was Diana. From her background as head of Social Affairs of the municipality of Highwater she especially attributed to discussions about indicators on employment and unemployment. Others, such as Bill and Graham, were from their background more interested in indicators on for example bankruptcies and vacant premises. This shows how the interests and the contributions of the various members of the Task Force significantly affected the discourse about the economic situation.

The interconnectedness of the structure and agency perspective is clearly visible in this example. The use of statistical data, especially from the Trend Monitor, can be interpreted both from a structure as from an agency perspective. On the one hand, this statistical information gave a (structural) framework to the sensemaking process, especially because of the apparent objective character of the data. But on the other hand, the statistical data were used in the discursive practice in the Task Force. In the discussions in the Task Force people picked out certain data from the Trend Monitor that were in line with their interests and/or experiences. An important basis for the sensemaking process about the state of the economy was the statistical data from the Trend Monitor, but in the discursive practice of the Task Force some elements were enlarged, adapted or neglected in order to come to a new meaning of the current state of the economy. This way structure and agency coexisted in the sensemaking process about the economic crisis.

### 5.3.2      *The discourse on the activities of the Task Force is shaped by examples from elsewhere and by the local discursive practice*

In the sensemaking process about the activities that the Task Force should come up with in order to respond to the economic crisis, the interconnectedness of the structure and the agency perspective becomes clear. In the story from the structure perspective it turns out how discourses from other (neighboring) municipalities played a role in the practice of the Task Force, especially when it came to deciding what activities the Task Force would do. Besides discussing the current state of the economy, one of the main objectives of the Task Force was to take actions to alleviate the effects of the crisis. But also here the members of the Task Force apparently needed

frameworks by which they could decide what activities to undertake. These frameworks were found in examples of other municipalities, but also in national initiatives that had to be introduced locally (for example the start index in section 5.2.2).

The power of agency also appeared in the activities of the Task Force. The Chances Card, on which these activities were described, was created from the interaction between the members of the Task Force. Several people in and around the Task Force (part of the activities was suggested by civil servants who were not in the Task Force) suggested the ideas for the activities of the Chances Card. The discursive practice that took place within the Task Force led to concrete proposals for activities. These activities were then put in motion by the Task Force. There were also examples of activities that were not officially initiated from the Chances Card, but which were started based on discussions within the Task Force. An example of this was mentioned by Edward. He talked about a hotel that was built. According to him, although this was not formally started by the Task Force and mentioned on the Chances Card, this project was for seventy percent initiated thanks to the Task Force. In this way, the discursive practice within the Task Force had thus a very real impact on the society of Highwater.

Both stories about the Task Force in Highwater show how structure and agency interact also in the sensemaking about the activities that the Task Force should do to mitigate the effects of the economic crisis. On the one hand this sensemaking process was influenced by the broader discourse, based on examples from elsewhere in the Netherlands, of municipalities that should act to take care of their citizens in this economic crisis. On the other hand, the discursive practice that took place during the meetings of the Task Force, when concrete ideas and initiatives were discussed, played an important role.

### 5.3.3 Political developments influenced the course of the Task Force

Next to the main sensemaking process of the Task Force, about the meaning of the economic crisis and the appropriate actions one should take, there were other developments that influenced the course of the Task Force in Highwater. Especially in the period that I followed the Task Force, there were some important political developments that clearly had an impact on the Task Force. These developments were described in the story from a structure perspective. First there were the local elections of 3 March 2010, the formation of the new college and the arrival of the new alderman for Economic Affairs as chairman of the Task Force. His first meeting of the Task Force was also the first meeting that I attended. Then there were the national elections of 9 June 2010 and the formation of the new government that followed. The public savings that were implemented both nationally and locally (partly as a result of the nationwide savings) clearly influenced the Task Force. From some fragments that I have used in the story about Highwater it

even seems as if the survival of the Task Force and its course were largely or even entirely affected by these kinds of broader political discourses.

These political developments are examples of the power of structure. Although the Task Force consisted of several individuals who together tried to give meaning to the economic crisis, the impact of it on the local situation in Highwater and the actions they could take as Task Force, this process of sensemaking was largely influenced by broader and existing discourses. Especially the public savings changed the discourse about the role of the municipality in the economic crisis. Whereas at first the Task Force talked about how the municipality (via the Task Force) could spend money to mitigate the effects of the crisis, when the public savings debate started people were talking about how the municipality could cut back to 'survive' the economic crisis.

#### 5.3.4      *The function of the Task Force was constructed discursively*

In the story about the Task Force from an agency perspective, the function of the Task Force was also described. This function was on the one hand a practical one: the Task Force should come up with activities to mitigate the effects of the economic crisis. But the members of the Task Force also talked about a different function which, in the context of this research, can be called a discursive function. The existence of the Task Force led in itself to a process of awareness in the Task Force of the economic crisis and the impact of this crisis on the local context of Highwater. By speaking about this topic, people actually became aware of the crisis and its consequences. Or, put another way: by talking about this a shared discourse was constructed. Externally, the Task Force also clearly had a discursive effect. The fact that the members of the Task Force came together was a signal to the residents and businesses of Highwater that the municipality was working with its partners to do something about the consequences of the economic crisis. The interaction that took place in the Task Force thus influenced both the discourse within the Task Force as well as the discourse in the society of Highwater.

This discursive function of the Task Force was something that the members were more or less aware of. Although they used different words to describe it, they realized that just by getting together with representatives from different local organizations to 'do something' in response to the economic crisis, they were influencing the local discourse. This awareness in the Task Force, but also the signaling function to the community of Highwater, are examples of influence through the discursive practice that took place in the Task Force.

#### 5.3.5      *The composition of the Task Force influenced its course*

Finally, the power of agency is also evident from the influence of the composition of the Task Force on its development. The municipality was clearly the party that was best represented in the Task Force, and it was also seen by the different members as the most decisive party. This had to do with the numerical majority of representatives of the municipality in the discursive practice of the



Task Force, but also the fact that the municipality provided the chairman and the secretary. There were also 'internal' meetings, with only the representatives of the municipality, where the 'external' meetings, with all the members, were prepared. This again stressed the important role that the municipality played in the Task Force. The discursive practice was thus strongly determined by the representatives of the municipality and this again strongly influenced the discourse of the Task Force.

All in all, the stories of the Task Force in Highwater show how in the discursive process there was power emerging from broader and existing discourses, like the statistical data about the state of the economy, examples from other municipalities and the discourse on public savings, but also power emerging from the discursive practice that took place in the Task Force, like the influence of personal backgrounds, interests and ideas on the discourse about the state of the economy and the appropriate actions the Task Force should take, the discussions about the 'discursive' function of the Task Force and the influence of the composition of the Task Force on its course. Sometimes structure and agency could be clearly distinguished, but sometimes they were rather interconnected. The latter was especially the case in the discourse about the state of the economy and the actions the Task Force should take. Here both the influence of broader and existing discourses and the influence of the local discursive practice were present.



## 6 The Leading Group in Dryland

In this chapter, I describe my research in Dryland. As I explained in chapter 4, this is a fictitious name for the municipality where I did my research. I have made the name of the municipality, as well as the names of several persons that play a role in this group, anonymous.

The description of this municipality has the same outline as that of Highwater in chapter 5.

In section 6.1 I describe Dryland from a structure perspective and in section 6.2 I describe the same situation again, but then from an agency perspective. As with Highwater, also here both descriptions can be read independently of each other as separate, stand-alone stories.

In section 6.3 I give a reflection on my research in Dryland. Here I will deal specifically with my role as a researcher. Again the distinction between structure and agency plays an important role.

### 6.1 *The Leading Group in Dryland from a structure perspective*

The description of Dryland I give in this section is from a structure perspective. I describe how my analysis shows that several existing discourses played an important role in the development of the Economic Leading Group in Dryland. These discourses strongly affected the process of the Leading Group and the thought and actions of the various members of the Leading Group. In the various texts that I have used (from meetings, interviews and documents) for my research existing discourses are translated to the local practice of the Leading Group: discourse-in-practice.

#### 6.1.1      *The start of the Leading Group*

The Leading group in Dryland was founded in the first half of 2009 as 'Leading Group Economic Crisis'. The reason for this was, of course, the economic crisis that had erupted in the end of 2008.

##### 6.1.1.1.      The broader discourse on the economic crisis

The broad discourse on this economic crisis that emerged from this period resulted in Dryland in the establishment of the Leading Group early 2009. This is demonstrated by the following fragment from the interview I had with Peter, director of one of the housing cooperatives that were in the Leading Group from the start.

<p><i>Mark: "Okay. And can you remember that first, what that first meeting, the first few meetings, how was the economic crisis viewed at, and the current state of affairs and also the link to the local context here?"</i></p> <p><i>Peter: "It was, I think, well, in part this is also my retrospective, I'm not sure if that is also the retrospective of the Leading Group. But the, say the credit crisis, the credit crunch as it was called in England, [Michael] and, no, some members of the college and I saw this up close in an excursion we had in</i></p>
---

*Northern England. Because there you saw, there the financial crisis was much earlier and more violent. The whole construction sector there came to a standstill. Unemployment rose dramatically. So we did have the sense: this can be quite severe. Meanwhile, on the other hand, we had just heard the unctuous words from Wouter Bos [at that time the Dutch minister of Finance, MvD] that there really was nothing wrong and that the Netherlands had such a strong economy that we did not need to worry. So that real economic pain is still to come, we have not felt it yet in our society. Not even now, you know, let's just ascertain that together. That the level of prosperity that we have, on average, is still very high and that the real pain will come in the next years with the municipal budget cuts and thus the fall out of a very large part of the expenditures. Then the economy will get hurt. So the economy has not had any pain in my, in my experience. So it was, because if you look at the amount of bankruptcies, that was not so bad. And if you look at the unemployment rate and the development of it, that was not so bad. And if you look at the amount of startups, that was actually very positive. So there were a lot of indicators in the recent quarters, which were delivered by the department of Research and Strategy, that really did not give such a pessimistic picture of the state of the economy of [Dryland]. But the great pressure of the knowledge from the outside world was: phew, you know, there's quite something ahead of us, so we have to think about it, we have to keep stimulating that construction sector, yes, but that construction sector is not willing, because people do not buy anymore because they have insecurities about the financial situation. Because that is true of course: consumer confidence has started to falter. So you saw, so to say, a drop in demand for expensive consumer goods: cars and, of course especially for a housing cooperative very important, properties. So there were some elements, and we also spoke about that: can we tackle such issues? Can we for example, as they tried in [name of a different Dutch municipality], make a kind of arrangement that someone who wants to sell his house and buys a new house, gets some sort of arrangement so he does not get troubled with double expenses, you know, you can think of such ideas. We tried it with the [name of a bank], together with the municipality and [name of the other housing cooperative]. We couldn't come to a solution. However, this did not deter us to sell successfully 70 houses here on the market in 2010. So, you know, like that. So that, so the, first it was like: there is a great danger coming from the world. We do not see it here, but we see here and there some drop in demand. Let us join hands to see if what we.. Well, and so we have done a number of things."*

Interview Peter, 25 August 2011

In this interview fragment Peter refers to a trip to Northern England, at which some of the later members of the Leading Group joined. There they encountered the Northern English discourse about the "credit crunch". This discourse apparently collided with the discourse of the people from Dryland, because, as Peter says, "there the financial crisis was much earlier and much more violent". The discourse of the excursion members from Dryland regarding the crisis was until then that of the former Dutch Finance Minister Wouter Bos, "that there really was nothing wrong and that the Netherlands had such a strong economy that we did not need to worry". This Dutch discourse "that there really was nothing wrong" was soon replaced by the "more violent" Northern English discourse. This happened for the excursion members from Dryland, who in Northern

England under the influence of the prevailing discourse all came to realize "this can be quite severe". But soon the pressure from the "violent" discourse was also felt broader: "the great pressure of the knowledge from the outside world was: phew, you know, there's quite something ahead of us, so we have to think about it, we have to keep stimulating that construction sector". The pressure from this discourse resulted in Dryland to concrete action, specifically the establishment of the Leading Group Economic Crisis: "first it was like: there is a great danger coming from the world. We do not see it here, but we see here and there some drop in demand. Let us join hands to see if what we.. Well, and so we have done a number of things". So the spreading of the discourse on the economic crisis in Northern England, later adopted in the Dutch "outside world" led in Dryland to the founding of the Leading Group. This was also under the influence of other discourses, examples from other municipalities. Peter cites one example: "we also spoke about that: can we tackle such issues? Can we for example, as they tried in [name of a different Dutch municipality], make a kind of arrangement that someone be wants to sell his house and buys a new house, gets some sort of arrangement so he does not get troubled with double expenses, you know, you can think of such ideas".

6.1.1.2. The broader discourse about the role and responsibility of local municipalities

In addition to the discourse of "the great danger" of the economic crisis, another discourse played a significant role in the establishment of the Leading Group in Dryland. This discourse was more about the role of municipalities. Ralph mentions it in the interview I had with him.

*Mark: "Could you tell me something about the start of the Economic Leading Group? How it started then, who were involved, who took the initiative, what was the occasion?"*

*Ralph: "In October 20... what was it... 08, right? Yes, in 2008, so long ago already. Then there was, so to say, the hype. At a certain time it began to settle a little, because you noticed that there was not much happening in municipalities. We made an analysis of the possible consequences in October, but apart from that it was actually quiet for a few months. Then in January at one point some publications appeared that said, well, municipalities should also do something. [...] Well, then we have taken the initiative as a municipality. And that was in February 2009. And then we said: well, we have to actually find a number of parties, a number of authoritative parties. We're not going to talk to all and sundry, but at a certain level with the decision makers within the organization, in order to prevent that it is again the representatives of the representatives and that there is a lot of talking."*

Interview Ralph, 12 January 2011

This fragment is the beginning of the interview with Ralph. When I ask him about the start of the Leading Group, he immediately refers to some existing discourses. First, the "hype". He does not say what he exactly means by that, but it seems to be a reference to the same discourse from the previous fragment of the interview with Peter: the discourse of the "great danger" of the crisis.

This "hype" apparently did not immediately get a response, "because you noticed that there was not much happening in municipalities". In Dryland an analysis was then made of the situation, but apparently there was no room yet in the broader discourse for concrete action. For that a change in the discourse was needed: "Then in January at one point some publications appeared that said, well, municipalities should also do something." It was these publications, and the underlying discourse that municipalities should take an active attitude towards the crisis, that stimulated the municipality of Dryland concretely into action and led to the start of the Leading Group Economic Crisis.

#### 6.1.1.3. Examples from other municipalities

At the time of the start of the Leading Group not only the more general discourse of "municipalities should also do something" was of major impact. Also examples from other municipalities played a role. This could already be seen in the fragment from the interview with Peter, in which a different Dutch municipality was referred to. In the following fragment from the interview with Fay there is another example of this.

*Fay: "Then we had quite a debate in the city council and we actually, it struck us, soon after that most who, who related it to the economy, many municipalities actually did all a bit of a box of tricks, they just did their normal economic policies and they put everything in there and then suddenly called it economic crisis. And we have actually turned it around, we said: no, eco., just our normal policy should be continued, what does, what should be added to that to give a boost, with the intention that it just would be temporary."*

Interview Fay, 12 January 2011

Although Fay wants to demonstrate the uniqueness of Dryland in this fragment, she refers to examples from other municipalities: "many municipalities actually did all a bit of a box of tricks, they just did their normal economic policies and they put everything in there and then suddenly called it economic crisis." This shows that the dominant discourse within municipalities was indeed affecting the discourse in Dryland as well. This also underlines what I say earlier in my research in the selection of the municipalities. In section 4.2 I described this.

Several municipalities in the Netherlands turned out to have taken a similar initiative as Dryland in 2009. This fit in the currently prevailing discourse of "municipalities should also do something". Also the website of the VNG (Association of Dutch Municipalities) is interesting in this respect. As I described in section 4.2, they presented on their website a list of examples of different municipalities. These examples, in line with the currently prevailing discourse in municipalities, affected municipalities in starting initiatives such as the Leading Group in Dryland. Dryland was also clearly influenced by these kinds of examples.

### 6.1.2     State of the economy

In the Leading Group, there was regular discussion about the state of affairs of the economic crisis, or the broader state of the economy. This was almost each time a separate issue on the agenda of the meetings of the Leading Group. Again, also here many references were made to existing discourses.

#### 6.1.2.1.     The Economic and Social Thermometer

An important document that was used here was the Economic and Social Thermometer. This was a document that was composed by the municipality and which contained some statistics on Dryland, compared to the Netherlands in total. This document was thus written outside of the Leading Group, but it was an important document for this issue. As soon as there was a new Thermometer, and that was basically every month, it was sent along with the documents for the meetings of the Leading Group.

The Thermometer consisted of two parts: one economic and one social part. For both parts ten indicators were chosen. A comparison was made with the previous month and the previous year for each indicator and, moreover, the indicator for Dryland was compared to that for the Netherlands as a whole. The indicators were the following:

For the economic part:

- Number of registered jobseekers
- Number of registered non-working jobseekers
- Number of young registered jobseekers
- Number of young registered non-working jobseekers
- Number of registered jobseekers threatened with unemployment
- Number of current vacancies at the Public Employment Service (in Dutch: Werkbedrijf) of the Employee Insurance Agency (in Dutch: UWV)
- Number of submitted vacancies at the Public Employment Service of the Employee Insurance Agency
- Number of bankruptcies
- Number of start-up businesses
- Number of housing transactions

For the social part:

- Number of people up to 65 years with social assistance (in Dutch: WWB)
- Number of ended social assistances because of outflow to a job or study
- Number of people in a reintegration process
- Number of applications granted for special social assistance
- Number of applications granted for sustainable consumer goods
- Number of applications granted for a long-term supplement
- Number of applications granted for assistance to minima

- Number of applications submitted for a debt regulation
- Number of applications for individual facilities (in Dutch: WMO)
- Number of applications for domestic help (in Dutch: WMO)

At the beginning of the Thermometer, as a summary, for each indicator the percentage increase or decrease was presented and for the total amount of the ten indicators, the number of indicators with a favorable or unfavorable development was shown as well as the number of indicators with a better or worse score than a year before.

The important role given to the Economic and Social Thermometer shows that the Leading Group wanted to join well-established, widely accepted methods of measuring the state of the economy. Statistics is such a widely-accepted way, because it is often seen as objective. The numbers presented in the Thermometer were seen as the basis for the picture of the state of the economy. About this no discussion was needed, because the numbers were speaking for themselves, after all. In addition, the introduction of the Thermometer frequently referred to or quoted from the Economic Report of the Dutch Statistics Office (in Dutch: CBS). Here the state of the economy was presented in a few sentences. This was clearly a discourse that was seen as an authority. Although in the discussions held in the Leading Group on the state of affairs there was not much referred to the Economic and Social Thermometer, it was always present as a background document, and considered as an important document.

#### 6.1.2.2. Broader discourses about the economic situation

During the discussions in the Leading Group about the state of the economy, other discourses were also often referred to. A good example of this is a fragment from the report that I made of the meeting of the Leading Group on 10 March 2011.

*"[Michael] then gives the floor to [Peter] for his view on the current economic situation. He mentions several issues. First, he refers to an article in NRC in which the director of the Construction Fund says that we are 'slowly climbing out of the trough'. Secondly, he refers to many municipalities that are threatened to get into trouble with their development company, because of which there will probably be some Article 12 municipalities. Thirdly, he calls it 'more and more concerning' that at a European level there are discussions emerging about state aid by national governments. This makes it more difficult for the end users to get money. In addition to these worrying developments, he also sees opportunities. For example, many people with incomes of more than € 33,614 will soon have to buy their own house (because of Minister Donner's measure that these people are no longer allowed to rent social housing anymore). In [Dryland] we are talking about 3,000 to 4,000 houses."*

Leading Group meeting, 10 March 2011

In this fragment, the issue of the "Current economic situation" is discussed. The Economic and Social Thermometer of February 2011 was sent prior as an attachment for this item. During the meeting, each member of the Leading Group got the opportunity to say how he or she thought



about the current economic situation. In this fragment Michael, as chairman, gives the floor to Peter, director of one of the two housing corporation represented in the Leading Group. What is striking is that Peter is referring successively to several broader discourses to describe the current economic situation. First, he refers to the media: an article in NRC, a large Dutch newspaper, in which the director of the Construction Fund (an association for the construction sector) says that we are "slowly climbing out of the trough". Then he mentions the broader picture among municipalities of financial constraint and the risk that some municipalities will get the Article 12 status, which means that they will be temporarily under financial supervision of the county. Thirdly, he mentions a discourse at the European level about national governments that want to invest in their national economy, which is increasingly seen as state aid and therefore prohibited. Finally he refers to new legislation at a national level, forcing people with higher incomes who live in social housing to buy their own houses. What is striking is that the discourses that Peter mentions are very diverse. Some can be seen as positive developments in the economy, others as negative developments. The setting of the discourses also differs: from European to Dutch politics and from municipalities to the media or the construction industry. Peter mentions the developments, but gives no further meaning to them. Apparently, he thinks it is sufficient to refer to these types of discourses in the discussion in the Leading Group about the state of the economy.

The uncertainty about the state of the economy and the dependence on broader, existing discourses is also reflected in some interviews. An example is the following fragment from the interview with Fay.

*Mark: "Finally, if you look at the next few months, the next period, what do you expect will develop in the Leading Group? What are the main challenges?"*

*Fay: "I must tell you: I think, well, look, I know at least that we are going to make that restart, that restart economic vision, we are going to make that vision. I find it exciting to see what we will, because we have actually agreed again that we will have a brainstorm again at the end of February: what are we going for, you know, at least for the next year? Because other things we have agreed upon to a great extent. I do not know, I find that still exciting. Because I said to you: on the one hand, in the construction sector only now things are really pushing through. At the same time, you are of course completely influenced by messages that things are improving and going much better already. Whereas, if I look at us, we will also feel for the next two, three years or four years, the effects of the public savings. Well, I suppose with the others, in part it will be the same. For housing corporations it is the same. So maybe it is true that what has at first been the setting, where we thought about everyone and we thought along, and so on, but then it was still an abstraction, whereas now a lot of organizations experience, literally, and feel it as well, and then it becomes a lot more complicated and a lot tougher, because then you really have to force breakthroughs. And then it's not only that, you know, you can do something nice, and you have, because then it really means that you gradually come to a setting where you have to make a paradigm shift together on your economic approach. Well, that is complicated and tough. That includes, as we have discussed with*

*[Harold] once, like: why do companies say nothing? Well, that's actually quite logical, because you're not going to say out loud that you are almost bankrupt, because then you're for sure going bankrupt. So of course there is also a kind of cloud around it: how close can you get and how much do they trust you? But it also, at a certain moment, when it gets hard, it gets more fundamental and more difficult and more about making choices. And no one has had to do that like that for years. So it is still exciting, I think."*

Interview Fay, 12 January 2011

In this fragment I ask, quite at the end of the interview, about Fay's expectations for the future. Here you can see clearly that she does not quite see the entire picture yet. She obviously refers to different discourses, but they also seem contradictory: "on the one hand, in the construction sector only now things are really pushing through. At the same time, you are of course completely influenced by messages that things are improving and going much better already." Yet it is this kind of existing, broader discourses that apparently affect her opinion. She also applies them to the local situation in Dryland. But even there she mainly refers to a broader discourse: "Whereas, if I look at us, we will also feel for the next two, three years or four years, the effects of the public savings. Well, I suppose with the others, in part it will be the same. For housing corporations is the same." The discourse of the public savings, which come from the central government to the municipalities (see also section 6.2.4), determines her expectations for the future.

All in all, one can see how the conversation in the Leading Group on the state of the economy was mainly determined by several existing, broader discourses. Statistics, media reports, discussions from national or European politics or developments that came from the national government to municipalities. Even when these different discourses seemed to be contradictory on certain points, for example on the question whether it is getting better or worse, they were still playing an influential role.

### 6.1.3      *Limited influence of the Economic Leading Group on the crisis*

In line with the previous section, about the conversation in the Leading Group about the state of the economy, lies the question what the impact of the Leading Group was on this state of the economy. As the image of the crisis (or the broader economic situation) was largely determined by existing discourses, as shown in the previous section, it became more and more clear that the Leading Group actually had a very limited impact on the course of the crisis, even locally. Although the Leading Group was formed to actively mitigate the effects of the crisis on Dryland, nevertheless it turned out that the crisis was mostly something that 'happened' to the municipality. In some interviews this was also clearly alluded to.

6.1.3.1. Concrete impact of the Leading Group

*Mark: "The economic crisis, which was at the beginning the occasion for the Leading Group, right, you also said: that is in the objective very clearly and it still is. The way in which the Leading Group is looking at the economic crisis, before and now, can you notice any change, development, in the way in which the crisis is experienced, so to say?"*

*Ralph: "That there, the image, the positive side, no, the image that one part can be influenced and another part cannot be influenced, that has not changed. You know, so the areas where you can actually have no influence, like in particular industry, that is clear, and where you can have influence, when it comes to retail, when it comes to catering, when it comes to construction, that has not changed. I did notice that the long time to get things, to not spend those five tonnes but actually outside those five tons to get other things done, that at the beginning there was a stronger expectation that we could make progression locally than, well, than turns out now after one and a half, two years. And, well, that impatience, that is maybe inherent for entrepreneurs, you can see that very strong in people like [Ryan]. Because he actually had that idea about [Dryland] Sun City, that idea dates back to September 2009. You know, so, and we could indeed have acted quicker in that as a municipality."*

*Mark: "Yes. But do you also notice that people have the urgency to really, at the beginning you said, you know: people wanted that, they wanted that Economic Leading Group, or something like that, because they saw the crisis as a problem coming towards them..."*

*Ralph: "Well, that urgency, that sense of urgency that has not changed, but what you can see is that, it's like the water level, you know, first we thought the [river] would flood during the weekend, last weekend, and now we expect it tomorrow morning. It happens, but it comes a bit later, given the forecast how fast the water goes, we notice that from the very first day the collapse of the construction sector was announced for the next autumn, the next six months. And so what you actually see, so that, a part is actually, actually, well, for me also is an external factor. Because it does not take place, the hard necessity to do something actually automatically also diminishes a little. But that is something we cannot influence ourselves in [Dryland]. But if you look at all the forecasts that were issued and all expectations, well, so then we expect since the end of 2008 that the construction sector, you know, that was in 2009, then it was like: well, the first half of 2009 will be fine, but 20.. the second half of 2009 it will collapse completely. Well, that, you hear these forecasts, so every time they are postponed half a year. And that takes a little bit, and that impatience is of course a bit a part of [Ryan], as a person, but also like: yes, but we should actually do something, but you see actually, because the problem is not really specifically emerging, that the others are not like: well, now we must, now we put everything aside and now we have to face that problem..."*

Interview Ralph, 12 January 2011

Ralph, from the municipality, was from the beginning closely involved in the start of the Leading Group. However, he admitted in the interview that I had with him that he realized quite well that the impact of the Leading Group on the economic crisis was only very limited: "the image that one part can be influenced and another part cannot be influenced, that has not changed. You know, so the areas where you can actually have no influence, like in particular industry, that is clear, and

where you can have influence, when it comes to retail, when it comes to catering, when it comes to construction, that has not changed." A little further in the same fragment, he goes even further than that. Whereas he first mentions construction as a sector where you can have influence, he says a little later about the absence of the collapse of the construction sector: "And so what you actually see, so that, a part is actually, actually, well, for me also is an external factor. Because it does not take place, the hard necessity to do something actually automatically diminishes a little. But that is something we cannot influence ourselves in [Dryland]." Interesting in this fragment is that precisely the collapse of the construction sector, according to Ralph, would give the Leading Group more influence. The "sense of urgency" to do something is now, after all, absent in many people. In order to have influence, the Leading Group apparently needed a discourse in which a certain "sense of urgency" resounded. But this discourse was absent, because the construction sector, against the expectations of some people, including Ralph, did not collapse. And precisely this was a factor the Leading Group could not influence. So also here they were dependent on a broader discourse.

The same reasoning could be seen in the interview with Fay. In the following fragment we hear her speaking.

*Fay: "When I look back at it now, then our first analysis, that we thought that the construction sector would collapse quite quickly, that did not happen, you know. That is happening right now. And that, you know, that is what you have seen at a national level, that the after-effects, first you saw very slowly, we have had a lot of discussions like that: what is happening exactly on the market? On the housing market? Then you actually see only now the really big impact on everyone. I mean, and that is even apart from the fact that the weather has also been bad and that there is the bad, but that has just been the final blow, so to speak. So, look, and what has emerged with us, actually we have at any given time, I think, after the first pulse we have dried up a bit, because in one way or another I think the analysis was: it will happen very fast and then it turned out to be a very long-winded story. And there, if you, if I look at it analytically, right through that there are now those crazy public savings. And everyone has almost forgotten that these actually originated mainly from the crisis, you know, so it has paled. And then we have, I think, after two years, because we also had to present a report to the council, we thought: well, will we go back to business as usual now? And we asked everyone about this and then that Leading Group said by itself: gosh, as a construct, because it is also a kind of practice like, this time no advisory board and fixed constructs, but just sitting around the table with each other once in a while."*

Interview Fay, 12 January 2011

Fay, who, like Ralph, was from the municipality from the beginning one of the initiators of the Leading Group, also refers to the construction sector: "our first analysis, that we thought that the construction sector would collapse quite quickly, that did not happen, you know. That is happening right now." She mentions this delay of the collapse of the construction sector as one of the reasons

that the Leading Group "dried up a bit". The first impulse was apparently the expectation that the construction sector would collapse quickly, but the delay of it meant that the Leading Group could not do much. So again, it was an external factor that affected the influence of the Leading Group. And Fay mentions in this fragment yet another external factor: "And there, if you, if I look at it analytically, right through that there are now those crazy public savings." These savings, which came down on the municipality from outside the Leading Group, distracted the focus from the activities of the Leading Group and limited its influence. These public savings played a major role in the development of the Leading Group in a broader sense, but I will dwell on that in more detail in the next section.

#### 6.1.3.2. The psychological impact of the Economic Leading Group

In addition to the discourse about the direct impact on the economic crisis, which was considered as very limited by many members of the Leading Group, there was yet another discourse. This discourse was more about the indirect impact of the Leading Group, namely the psychological effect of the Leading Group towards the citizens and businesses of Dryland. In the following interview fragment, this discourse is articulated by Peter.

- Mark: "And that, say, more psychological goal that you described in the beginning, of showing: we are doing something, does that still apply for the next future?"*
- Peter: "Yes, I think that always applies. Because the.. you know Hugo Priemus, I think, professor at the Technical University of Delft, quite a renowned speaker and writer in the Netherlands, especially in housing and real estate issues, but anyway, he once said, it was not completely new, so you have probably heard it somewhere else, he said: well, look, in this time of crisis, the amount of divorces decreases. Because people choose for security. But you also see that in times of crisis, the amount of births decreases, because people delay having a child. In these times of crisis, the amount of suicide attempts increases. Durkheim already wrote wonderful analyses of this in the 19th century. So in the psychology of things a lot is going on at the time that people get a sense of crisis. Then anything can happen. That is not in the interest of society, I think. And if you can give some counterweight to that by giving people the feeling of: hey, do not despair, you are being watching over, you know, I think that's never wrong."*
- Mark: "But then you should go outside to radiate something different than what you might discuss internally?"*
- Peter: "Yes, yes. But I think that's an important feature for a think tank like the Leading Group, considering the problems that hit many people and that will get even heavier in the next period. How often do you hear that someone who goes almost bankrupt jumps in front of a train? You hear that quite often, right? Well, I'd like to see that that won't happen, not more often, than it is already happening as a result of the economic crisis. Well, if only we could do that, I think it's already a great, if I needed to I would be coming every day."*

Interview Peter, 25 August 2011

Striking in this fragment is that the discourse about the psychological impact of the Leading Group is strongly influenced by other existing discourses. Peter refers to Hugo Priemus, a professor at the Technical University of Delft, whom Peter once heard talking about the psychological effects of a crisis. Then Peter also refers to the sociologist Durkheim. These discourses Peter applies to the Leading Group in Dryland and he describes the psychological impact of the Leading Group as follows: "And if you can give some counterweight to that by giving people the feeling of: hey, do not despair, you are being watched over, you know, I think that's never wrong."

It seems that this discourse about the psychological impact of the Leading Group is linked to the discourse about the direct impact of the Leading Group on the economic crisis. Because this direct impact is only very limited, it seems that people start to focus on the indirect psychological effect. This is reflected in Peter's cautious wording in the above fragment. He talks about "some" counterweight and calls it "never wrong". Initially one wanted to influence the economic crisis in Dryland more directly through the Leading Group. Gradually however, the discourse tilted, because people realized that they could influence only in a very limited way. The absence of the collapse of the construction sector, reinforced by the discourse of the public savings that decreased the urgency and capacity for action of the Leading Group, played an important role in this. In response to this and to still legitimize the existence of the Leading Group, the focus shifted to this other discourse that was handed from the outside, about the psychological impact that the Leading Group might have.

#### 6.1.4 External developments and the Leading Group

In the previous sections, I already pointed out some external developments that affected the Leading Group. In this section I want to elaborate further on this. Indeed, the Leading Group experienced some development that was strongly influenced by some external, existing discourses.

##### 6.1.4.1. Public savings

The fact that the Leading Group received no new budget at its disposal, was strongly associated with a second external discourse that strongly influenced the development of the Leading Group: the discourse about public savings. Basically, this involves two discourses: first, the discourse of the public savings at a national level that affected the municipality of Dryland and secondly, the discourse of the project of the local savings that the municipality of Dryland had put in motion. Both are, of course, connected. The first discourse of the public savings at a national government level and the way in which this affected municipalities, including Dryland, became clearly evident in the meeting of the Leading Group of 16 December 2010. Here are some fragments from the report that I made of this meeting.

*[Michael] goes on to the next item on the agenda: 'Matter of choice'. This is about the plans of the municipality for the public savings. The day before the meeting, the proposals of the college of aldermen had*

*been discussed in the city council. [Michael] says that there is potential for savings for approximately € 34 million. Within this potential a distribution is made on a number of search directions. He says that in particular the proposed savings in the social domain evoked much discussion in the council. [...]*

*[Peter] comes back to what [Michael] said about the savings in the social domain. He asks whether these savings have not yet been filled in. [Michael] responds that this has not yet happened, but that it is known that there is a target of € 5 million. He calls this a high amount. [Peter] responds that the municipality of The Hague has spared the social sector by setting extra targets for other sectors. [Michael] responds that many savings in the social sector come from The Hague (the national government). The question is, according to him, whether the municipality should act here as an intermediary. He believes that this is partly the case. The municipality of [Dryland] has chosen to initially translate the choices from The Hague directly and only then to see whether this is acceptable. [John] responds that [Dryland] goes the opposite way: the social sector is not spared in advance. [Michael] says that through this way of acting it becomes clear what the consequences of the policy from The Hague are or would be. He also stresses that the savings are not implemented one-on-one, but that a specific roadmap is used to make conscious choices. [...]*

*[John] reacts that in the process of the public savings there are two boundaries: one does not want an increase in taxes on the one hand, and on the other hand one wants to protect the weak. Both lead to limitations. He says that he does not yet feel reassured: there will probably be more measures coming from the national government towards the municipalities. [...]*

*[Fay] comes back to the question of what [Dryland] does different in the process of public savings. She says that at the level of the civil service one had already started before the elections, in a similar way as the national government, namely by identifying the different possibilities (these were not yet proposals). By following this procedure, there is now a surplus of savings opportunities through which you can deal at once with the additional measures from the national government.*

Leading Group meeting, 16 December 2010

At this meeting of the Leading Group on 16 December 2010, the process of public savings of the municipality of Dryland was a separate item on the agenda. During the discussion, it turned out to be a lot about the public savings on a national level. Michael replies to a question from Peter about the budget cuts in the social sector "that many savings in the social sector come from The Hague (the national government). The question is, according to him, whether the municipality should act here as an intermediary. He believes that this is partly the case. The municipality of [Dryland] has chosen to initially translate the choices from The Hague directly and only then to see whether this is acceptable. [John] responds that [Dryland] goes the opposite way: the social sector is not spared in advance. [Michael] says that through this way of acting it becomes clear what the consequences of the policy from The Hague are or would be." This fragment shows how important the public savings on a national level were for the municipality and how the approach of the national government largely influenced the approach of the municipality. For their perspective on the future the municipality also looked closely to the national government. As John says in this fragment: "there will probably be more measures coming from the national government towards the municipalities." And Fay explains a little later that the procedure followed by the municipality will ensure that "there is now a surplus of savings opportunities through which you can deal with

the additional measures from the national government." In other words: because one had picked up from the discourse at the level of the national government that there would be more budget cuts, this was already taken into account by the municipality. The importance of this discourse for the Leading Group was mainly in the fact that the budget that the city council had made available for the establishment of the Leading Group, € 500,000, was almost entirely spent. A question that was frequently asked within the Leading Group in this period was whether a new budget would be made available. Because of the interference of the discourse about public savings, this was not very likely anymore. This meant that the Leading Group could not take concrete actions any longer, there was simply no money. The Leading Group therefore had to rethink its activities for the future. The way in which this reconsideration developed is discussed in the next section.

The discourse of the public savings at the national level has had a clear influence on the local level. This was evident from the above fragments. In response, the municipality of Dryland had also started its own local public savings program. This process took place at the time that I started my research in Dryland. The process ran separately from the Leading Group, but most members of the Leading Group were involved. This discourse of the local process of public savings clearly had its repercussions for the developments in the Leading Group. In the following fragment from the interview with Fay this becomes clear.

*Fay: "But you see a kind of reluctance in politics, because, well, in fact you start to take stock interactively and there is actually said: let's first do the process of public savings interactively, see what happens there, draw learning effects out of it and then continue with the economic approach, say, the economic vision. Because otherwise, and that is one reason, but also because otherwise, [Dryland] is not that big, you run so many processes at once to the same city, which is confusing, then citizens no longer understand what you're doing. So therefore it is, so it has not so much delayed than that it simply had to take place in the right order of things. And we see at the elec.. the savings now that you have much more to do with civil society, because well, they are directly, they get their budget directly from the municipal budget, and that businesses are looking: what is happening here? And initially we thought: why don't they cooperate? But actually that makes sense, because they, well, except for the fact that they sometimes apply for a small subsidy, but that is very rare, they of course, they have very different needs from the municipality, so that's not directly financial needs. This is much more in development plans, well, and all kinds of contracts, but just different. So in that sense it makes sense in the order of things. And for us it is also just to see if the methods that we are figuring out, if they work."*

Interview Fay, 12 January 2011

Fay refers to the activity of writing the economic vision for Dryland. This is an activity that the municipality had already planned to do and one had decided that this would be done in an interactive way, using the Leading Group. In the next section I will elaborate on this. In this fragment, Fay indicates that this writing of the economic vision had been postponed because of



the public savings program. This process of public savings had also been done interactively by the municipality and one did not want to let too many interactive processes run simultaneously. So they gave priority to the public savings program, and therefore the writing of the economic vision by the Leading Group had to wait. These considerations show how the local public savings program greatly influenced the developments. At the start of my research in Dryland, in the spring of 2010, the fact that the Leading Group would start writing the economic vision was already talked about. At the conclusion of my research in Dryland, late 2011, they finally started with this. This delay was largely caused by the intervention of the public savings program.

#### 6.1.4.2. Co-creation

From the moment I had my first conversations in Dryland, in the spring of 2010, one was already talking about the fact that the Leading Group would play an important role in the writing of the new economic vision for Dryland. Eventually, it was only after more than a year, in the second half of 2011, that a start was made, but it was regularly returning as an agenda item. An important issue in the writing of this vision was that people wanted to do this in 'co-creation'. This would imply that the municipality would not write the vision by itself, but together with its social partners. And because some of these social partners were already participating in the Leading Group, they wanted to use the Leading Group for this. The discourse around co-creation in the Leading Group was mainly initiated by the municipality. This was clearly related to the fact that within the municipality there was already a broader discourse about co-creation.

A fragment in which this broader discourse is referred to is from the interview with Ralph. In this fragment, Ralph talks about his expectations for the Leading Group for the foreseeable future.

*Ralph: "Yes, starting in February that economic vision will be on the agenda. Yesterday I said to [Fay]: for me there is only one "but", because we have the intention that, especially from [Michael] as alderman from D66, and D66 of course wants participation and representation of citizens, and everything to the maximum level, so we want this economic vision, it should be on the level of co-creation, well, of course that is quite unique, because of course, almost always you have to deal with a government that is never on a level playing field with private parties. Still that is what we want. Well, we want to face that challenge."*

Interview Ralph, 12 January 2011

Although Ralph has always been, also in this interview, a strong supporter of the idea of co-creation, he shows here that this is not an idea that arose spontaneously in Dryland. He refers to the role of Michael and the political discourse from which he comes: "D66 of course wants participation and representation, and everything to the maximum level, so we want this economic vision, it should be on the level of co-creation." The idea of co-creation was apparently initiated, or

at least reinforced by the political discourse from the environment of D66, a Dutch political party that has citizen participation as one of their priorities. This national discourse was translated here into the local practice of Dryland.

The alderman concerned with the D66 background, Michael, uttered in the interview that I had with him also this discourse about participation. Even when it was not specifically in relation to co-creation and the economic vision.

*Michael: "Yes, I truly believe, ten, fifteen years ago, public-private partnerships were really novelties and they were really constructions and we called them PPPs and finally I have the idea that this novelty has faded fortunately, but you just have to try to cooperate to accomplish things together in certain areas. But that means no permissiveness. And the tendency sometimes is: well, it is not binding, so we talk, we drop some good ideas and the municipality picks it up and does the implementation. No, in this case also other parties will have to implement certain things themselves."*

Interview Michael, 24 January 2011

Michael is talking in this fragment not specifically about co-creation in relation to the economic vision, but more in general about cooperation within the Leading Group between the municipality and the other parties. For this cooperation, he refers to a broader trend that has long been apparent: "ten, fifteen years ago, public-private partnerships were really novelties and they were really constructions and we called them PPPs and finally I have the idea that this novelty has faded fortunately, but you just have to try to cooperate to achieve. Accomplish things together in certain areas." Michael sees the cooperation within the Leading Group as something that clearly comes from a broader discourse, that of the PPPs. This was perhaps new, ten or fifteen years ago, but now it's not a novelty anymore. It is, in the words of this research, a widely-shared discourse. And Dryland joins this discourse with the Leading Group. The writing of the economic vision through co-creation between the municipality and other parties was only an example.

The two fragments that I mentioned so far to illustrate the new focus on co-creation were from interviews with representatives from the municipality of Dryland. It is interesting, especially in relation to this subject, to look at what the other participants of the Leading Group have said about this subject. In the interview with Iris, director of an institution for higher education, this topic was also discussed.

*Mark: "When you talk about that role of the municipality and the other parties around it. That development is now towards the co-creation story, right, so we're going to do things together. Well, you just said something like: it is now starting to work. How do you look at that? Do you see it as a potential, as a real possibility?"*

*Iris: "Yes, it is funny, you can see co-creation emerge as a concept when it comes to education and research. And there are already examples of it, we have a lectureship paid by [name of a company] in [another region], it helps us to set up a mechatronics education program, for their own benefit, but also for.. So working together on things, and taking joint responsibility and not separately, this is kind of a trend that you see broader, and not just, say, when it comes to shaping the economic policy of the municipality of [Dryland]. As a method, when it comes to choosing, well, that's still exciting, of course, because how visionary will it be? Or is it very much, because visionaries usually are, those are not the conservative powers. And how will the business interests in the short and medium term, how do you get that.. I think that will be exciting. Will this result in a top level or will you stick to some kind of common average, some kind of greatest common divisor? I don't know. And sometimes it is necessary to, against other people's will, you know, to make people happy against their will, as we call it here. And I do not know whether co-creation, whether that space, whether you can give each other that space."*

Interview Iris, 28 November 2011

The interview with Iris took place in late 2011, when the Leading Group had actually started with the composition of the economic vision. Her response shows that she did not really see the idea of co-creation as something new, or specific for Dryland. From her own educational background, she says: "you can see co-creation emerge as a concept when it comes to education and research. And there are already examples of it". In other words, the Leading Group in Dryland acts in line with, and might also be influenced by, a broader discourse. A little further she says: "So working together on things, and taking joint responsibility and not separately, this is kind of a trend that you see broader, and not just, say, when it comes to shaping the economic policy of the municipality of [Dryland]".

The self-evidence with which Iris talked in this interview, in late 2011, about co-creation, was not yet visible to everyone a few months earlier in the Leading Group. In the meeting of the Leading Group on 28 April 2011 this issue was on the agenda. To the agenda a memo from the municipality was attached, which described the plans to develop the economic vision. The intention was to make a decision about the start of the process, based on this memo, during the meeting. Below is a fragment from the report that I have made of this meeting.

*Point 6b is next: 'Joint approach for writing the economic business plan for [Dryland] 2020'. A 'Memo about the desired participation level for writing the economic business plan for [Dryland] 2020' has been sent as an attachment. [Michael] asks if there are any comments on the memo. [Peter] says he could not read the attachments, so he was not able to see the levels of the interaction ladder. [Fay] says she can explain them once more. She says that the interaction ladder is used often within the municipality of [Dryland]. Its purpose is not to get as high as possible on the ladder, but to choose each time for the appropriate level. The municipality of [Dryland] now often operates at the level of counseling. The goal now is to act at the level of collaboration. This means that the city council delegates part of its responsibility. For the members of the*

*Leading Group (not as representatives of their constituencies, but as individuals) this means a prior commitment to their responsibilities. Now it is time to look for a concrete definition of the level of collaboration.*

*[Paula] asks whether there are examples of this way of operating. [Fay] responds that it mainly happens in sustainability projects, but often in the background. [Peter] mentions the example of the Rotterdam Climate Initiative. [Fay] responds that [Dryland] operated similarly in the process of public savings.*

Report Leading Group meeting, 28 April 2011

In the discussion about this issue, the municipality was steering a lot. The memo was written by the municipality. This makes sense given the discourse on co-creation that was already fully present within the municipality, as can be seen in the vision for the future and the coalition agreement to which Fay already referred in the interview fragment quoted above. So in the discussion during this meeting it was Michael and Fay who introduced this topic from the municipality. Remarkably, the reactions of the other members were somewhat hesitant. The first reaction of Paula, director of a local bank, was significant: she asked whether there were examples of this way of working in co-creation. This was significant because it showed that she apparently needed examples that showed that the idea of

co-creation was in line with a broader discourse. She wanted to see other discourses on this subject, this apparently gave her confidence in the new method. In response to this question it turned out that these examples were plenty. Three examples were mentioned: sustainability projects in general, more specific the Rotterdam Climate Initiative, and as a local example the process of public savings mentioned earlier. These examples showed again that the new focus of the Leading Group on co-creation was strongly influenced by existing, broader discourses on this subject.

#### 6.1.4.3. Sustainability

Besides co-creation in the context of the new economic vision, there was another topic that gradually emerged as a new focus subject of the Leading Group. This topic was sustainability. It was not explicitly mentioned as a new focus subject, but it was gradually more and more often put on the agenda of the Leading Group. And many members of the Leading Group also saw that this theme was playing an increasingly important role. It was not really a conscious choice; here also it turned out that broader discourses on the theme of sustainability greatly affected the Leading Group. A first example of this is the following fragment from the interview with Ralph.

*Ralph: "A, one difficult issue, but that has also to do with the aim: there is a lot of potential in the area of sustainability, you know, so when it comes to sustainable development and also locally, there it is vibrant and bustling. Soon I will meet someone from Rabo Netherlands, who wants to talk about the initiation of projects, especially for businesses. Friday I have a meeting with someone from ABN Amro / Fortis, there they start, well, I mean, the wall here is completely covered, a few weeks ago I put my thoughts on paper, I thought: in this area, how is everything connected in terms of*

*sustainability? [Fay] and I are hesitant to turn this group into a sustainability group, but actually this is slowing things down a little, because there are actually lots of opportunities that we do not discuss in the Economic Leading Group, when we would actually have to discuss them there, but if you do that, if you let that happen then there is potentially so incredibly much to be done, but then you also need to consider whether the setting is still the right one. So that's actually, you see the topics on the agenda, it is very often sustainability issues."*

Interview Ralph, 12 January 2011

Ralph says it very clearly in this fragment: "there is a lot of potential in the area of sustainability, you know, so when it comes to sustainable development and also locally, there it is vibrant and bustling." The issue of sustainability was therefore, according to him, not something the Leading Group had specifically chosen as a theme, and not something for which the members of the Leading Group had made a conscious decision. It was a theme that imposed itself, or as Ralph called, it offered opportunities you just had to discuss. The broader discourse on sustainability was apparently so strong that it came back time after time. It was so strong that subjects that were discussed in the Leading Group were often linked to the theme of sustainability. This made Ralph and Fay even consider to turn the Leading Group into a group about sustainability. Not because they wanted this per se, because Ralph says in this fragment that they were even a little hesitant, but because the discourse on sustainability imposed itself so strongly. In the following fragment, this is underlined once again.

*Mark: "And the theme of sustainability, which you mentioned as another, where, that is, you could see in the last meeting that it is somehow emerging, where does that come from? Because of course there are members at the table who are into the subject, there is an alderman for Sustainability..."*

*Michael: "Yes, but you see that, when we talk about innovation, which is currently one of the most important innovative policy fields in the Netherlands, that is sustainability. I mean, how can we use less energy to... but it is also an example of public savings. Everyone can see that you need to cut budgets, it's an investment now, but eventually you will have less energy costs when you start doing things sustainable. But also a completely different perspective: in construction it is also an issue. Investing in sustainability when it comes to existing housing provides a lot of employment. And it results in a huge decline in the use of energy. But at the same time precisely in the construction industry, also in the smaller companies, it results in a lot of jobs."*

*Mark: "Yes, so you are saying: it is actually a logical follow-up to...?"*

*Michael: "Yes. You can see it coming up actually everywhere. And there is also discussion, like: should sustainability not be a part of economy and innovation? But, well, there's also innovation in healthcare and there is also innovation in education, so I mean, you can... You could expand this innovation portfolio very widely. We linked it here specifically to the economic portfolio, and then sustainability automatically comes into play."*

Interview Michael, 24 January 2011

Michael is describing the same feeling as Ralph in the previous fragment: "which is currently one of the most important innovative policy fields in the Netherlands, that is sustainability." And a little further on he says: "You can see it coming up actually everywhere." In short: Michael apparently also experienced a strong pressure from the discourse on sustainability. The theme was so present everywhere that the Leading Group simply could not ignore it. This resulted in the fact that in the Leading Group, besides writing the economic vision in co-creation, the sustainability theme gradually presented itself as the second major focus for the future.

## **6.2 The Leading Group in Dryland from an agency perspective**

An analysis of the Leading Group in Dryland from an agency perspective provides quite a different story. This is the story of discursive practice: how meaning was given to the economic crisis in the establishment and development of the local discourse of the Leading Group in Dryland. This story is about the details that characterize the discourse in Dryland, the local differences from other discourses. Also in this story, and in the examples of discursive practice that are mentioned, different texts from documents, interview reports and reports of meetings play a central role.

### 6.2.1 Purpose and function of the Leading Group

The purpose and function of the Leading Group was a regular topic of discussion in the meetings of the Leading Group and also in the interviews I held with members of the Leading Group. This subject was as it were constantly evolving; purpose and function were constantly discursively formed.

#### 6.2.1.1. The 'formal' purpose of the Leading Group

Perhaps the most 'formal' purpose of the Leading Group was formulated by Ralph in the interview I had with him.

*Mark: "What was the most important question that those external parties had, why they wanted such a Leading Group?"*

*Ralph: "Well, the possibility, that is always, I think it is still in here, that phrase, to mitigate the effects of the economic crisis. That was actually, you know, I mean, we have always been realistic, we said: we can not change the local economic crisis or remove it or whatever, we can however, just try to soften the effects to, well, also try to temporarily prevent companies from going bankrupt or from having to fire people, or at least to postpone that as much as possible."*

Interview Ralph, 12 January 2011

Ralph says the main objective of the Leading Group was to "mitigate the effects of the economic crisis." He refers to this as a "phrase" that could apparently be assumed to be known, and which

indeed appears in the initial memo from 2009 ("Approach of the economic crisis in [Dryland]"). The fact that Ralph mentions this 'formal' goal is not very surprising, because he was, as secretary of the Leading Group, partly responsible for this 'formal' line. He was also the author of many of the documents of the Leading Group.

#### 6.2.1.2. Meeting and information exchange as aim of the Leading Group

Within the discourse of the Leading Group there were, however, also other elements relating to purpose and function of the Leading Group. For instance, the elements that Iris mentioned in the interview I had with her.

*Mark: "What was the goal then, initially?"*

*Iris: "I think it was sharing things with each other and also, there was also a certain sum of money, say, to come up with projects that would be an incentive for the economy."*

*Mark: "Yes. Yeah, so a little twofold actually: to exchange information and to actually do something."*

*Iris: "Yes. The municipality also wanted to put some money in it. But then we're not talking about millions or so."*

*Mark: "No, that was quite a demarcated budget, I believe, at the beginning."*

*Iris: "Yes."*

Interview Iris, 28 November 2011

Iris mentions here as the main purpose of the Leading Group two elements: "sharing things with each other" and "to come up with projects that would be an incentive for the economy." The second element may be seen as in line with objective Ralph mentioned. The projects Iris is talking about were intended to mitigate the effects of the crisis. However, the first element that Iris mentions is new. "Sharing things with each other," or the "exchange of information" (my words) is an objective which was not formulated as such formally, but which apparently came up during the process. Also in the interview with Michael some of these issues came forward.

*Michael: "And, well, sometimes that already leads to surprising partnerships. Especially when you link it to sustainability. I mean: doing things in your own region is of course very sustainable. Why, it's of course crazy that contractors drive from Amsterdam to Twente for a construction project and that other contractors drive from Twente to Amsterdam to a construction project there. Well, that sort of things. We have here, which was addressed quite strongly in the Leading Group, [name of a housing cooperative], one of the housing cooperatives, has granted all of its installation work to a company from [Dryland], [name of installation company], also in the Leading Group, because of the sustainable nature that [name of installation company] radiates, because of the quality that they can provide, but also because of the appeal that it is done: well guys, if we can do this for you, we will drive electric cars. If you grant that to us long-term for six thousand houses, then we can make that investment. And with electric cars, we cannot commute to Den Bosch. So. And then you see that new connections are made, but that there are also other arguments, namely that aspect of*

*sustainability. Of course, price remains also important for this kind of parties, but the sustainability aspect, and the fact that the employees of [name of installation company] mostly live in the houses of [name of housing cooperative]. Because these are often people who live in a rental home, so they rent from one of the corporatives. So you can see cooperation, that that network in your city is further strengthened."*

*Mark: "Yes. And that emerges clearly within that Leading Group, because obviously there both of the..."*

*Michael: "Those parties are at the table, but, and this is one example, but there will undoubtedly be more contacts made, like: have you ever talked to...? And that network is so important."*

Interview Michael, 24 January 2011

Although this fragment is not specifically about the purpose of the Leading Group, Michael describes what he sees as a major function of the Leading Group. He describes how he sees "surprising partnerships" evolve between members of the Leading Group. He specifically points towards the cooperation between two members of the Leading Group, the representatives of a housing cooperative and of an installation company. The Leading Group fulfilled here, according to Michael, a networking function: "So you can see the cooperation, that that network in your city is further strengthened." The discursive character is very clear, because it is the discursive practice within the Leading Group that starts the cooperation between two organizations. The discourse of the Leading Group led here to concrete activities of two members. And although he names it differently, this element of discursive practice, of new practices that started in the Leading Group, is for Michael as Alderman for Economic Affairs and Chairman of the Leading Group of great interest.

During the meetings of the Leading Group the purpose and function of the Leading Group was also discussed several times. This, too, was often evidently discursive practice: the meaning of the Leading Group was as it were locally constructed in these conversations about the purpose and function of the Leading Group. Several members of the Leading Group took part in these conversations, as evidenced by the following fragment.

*[Michael] responds that according to him the round that has just been made about how everyone looks at the current situation is extremely enlightening, it provided a broad story. This has, in his opinion, clearly added value. He does mention that in the beginning more concrete actions were taken.*

*[Harold, president of the employers' association] thinks the encounter is useful. He sees that the effectiveness of the Leading Group decreases because the money is running out. Perhaps the frequency of the meetings can be reduced. He says that it is a good thing that the municipality has ensured (apart from the Leading Group) that [name of local business A] has been retained in [Dryland]. [Michael] responds that the discussions in the Leading Group have definitely strengthened this. He says that a municipality must also get the chance to help a company: the company needs to ring the bell in time. Often this does not happen because companies want to keep up appearances as long as possible. He calls [name of local company A] as*



*a good example, as well as the current example of [name of local company B], but he also says that for many companies their situation is unknown.*

*[Harold] says that [name of local company B] is mostly owned by [name of a private equity firm], this is an interesting partner for the municipality instead of or in addition to banks, which are often not very cooperative. [Michael] responds that the municipality talks a lot to this type of private equity firms. [Peter] asks whether any of these situations also has a psychological effect, namely that entrepreneurs (and others) see the ambitions of the municipality. [Michael] responds that from the region the partnerships in [Dryland] are being observed with a lot of interest.*

Leading Group meeting report, 10 March 2011

In this fragment the continuation of the Leading Group was discussed during a meeting of the Leading Group. This also involved looking back, based on a memo that was written by Ralph. In this fragment a question from this memorandum is discussed: "Do we think that we have succeeded in our original intent to mitigate the effects of the economic crisis?". Here the original 'formal' goal of the Leading Group comes back, but the reactions of various members show that, meanwhile, one sees a broader purpose and function of the Leading Group. Michael stresses the importance of the "round" that has just been made. This refers to the question that has been discussed previously in the same meeting about the state of the local economy. Here the various members gave their impressions on this state of affairs. Michael apparently considers this, the exchange of information and images about the state of the local economy, as an important function of the Leading Group. This also relates to what he and Iris said in the fragments quoted above. Harold, a director of a local company and president of a local employers' association, mentions in this fragment the element of "encounter". This encounter has, according to Harold, clearly the character of discursive practice. He refers to the example of a local company. This company has its head office in Germany and a production site in Dryland. Because the company had to cut budgets, it wanted to close a production site, and it seemed to be the most logical choice to close the site in Dryland. Harold praises the efforts of the municipality, which resulted in the retaining of the production site in Dryland. Michael points out, however, that this succeeded partly because of the discussions in the Leading Group. In other words, the discourse that developed in the Leading Group has indeed led to concrete actions. The case of this company is a good example. In this fragment the case of another company is mentioned. Once again, the evolving discourse leads to suggestions for concrete actions to save this company. These are clear examples of how the evolving discourse about the purpose and function of the Leading Group led to concrete actions. Through the interaction within the Leading Group meaning was given to reality and the actions of the Leading Group and its individual members were formed.

#### 6.2.1.3. The psychological function of the Leading Group

Another important element in the function of the Leading Group is the element that Peter mentions at the end of the above fragment. He talks about the possible psychological effect of the examples

of companies that were saved by the Leading Group and / or the municipality. In the next fragment, from the interview I did with Peter, it becomes clearer what he means by this.

*Peter: "But I think the Leading Group, its meaning was not so much, and I will put it positively, not so much in the fact that there was a group of people who were, with 'sturm und drang' and fully informed, able to cope with the economic recession. Certainly not. But they were signboards of major organizations in the city. It also had a psychological effect, that citizens and entrepreneurs in this city saw how a number of executives in the society of [Dryland] wanted to face the threat of a massive crisis that could affect our city, our municipality. And that psycholo.. that psychological effect I think, it was significant, for example, it was significant for being able to allocate, albeit for a limited amount, but an amount from the municipal budget to the Alderman for Economic Affairs, in the first instance that was... not [Michael] but..."*

*Mark: "[name of former alderman / chairman of the Leading Group]."*

*Peter: "[name of former alderman / chairman of the Leading Group. He started it indeed. So that there was money and that with that money some, well, partly some simple show projects, you know, an evening in the theatre of [Dryland] is obviously not something that turns a recession around. But it does indicate: guys, we work together on this. Unfortunately it did not take place, but okay. Vouchers for SMEs, those are of course just drops in the ocean. But again, so I think the effect was not so much as a group: who are well-informed and able to really get something done, with their knowledge and skills, but it is more the psychological effect: look, there is being thought about it, there is being worked on it, we here as a municipality, as politicians, and as [Dryland's] finest, we are concerned and we put our shoulders to the wheel."*

Interview Peter, 25 August 2011

Peter refers in this interview fragment to the same "psychological effect" that the Leading Group might have. He describes this as "a psychological effect, that citizens and entrepreneurs in this city saw how a number of executives in the society of [Dryland] wanted to face the threat of a massive crisis that could affect our city, our municipality." Peter sees this effect as an important function of the Leading Group. He even refers to some of the projects started by the Leading Group to mitigate the effects of the economic crisis as "show projects". The impact of these projects was according to him not so much that they immediately changed the impact of the economic crisis, but rather that the people of

Dryland would feel that "there is being thought about it, there is being worked on it". This is the psychological effect that Peter is talking about. In my own words, I would describe this as the discursive effect: the discourse that developed in the Leading Group gives a positive meaning to the reality of the people of Dryland. They see the effects of the economic crisis as less negative because of the discursive practice of the Economic Leading Group and the projects that emerge from it.

#### 6.2.1.4. Sustainability

During the period that I examined the Economic Leading Group in Dryland, the issue of sustainability was gaining attention. Again, this is a process of discursive practice. The following fragment is from the 'Memo for discussion on the follow-up of the Economic Leading Group'. This memorandum was prepared by Ralph on behalf of the municipality Dryland and was discussed during the meeting of the Leading Group on 10 March 2011.

*Sustainability is becoming a promising theme with which local economic activity can be promoted above average. Do we think that sustainability should get a more specific role in the next period?*

*[...]*

*Sustainability is a promising theme with which the Leading Group can stimulate economic activity that helps reduce the local effects of the economic crisis and to stimulate economic activity. Based on the priorities from the covenant of sustainability, that has been closed with the province on 18 February 2011, the Leading Group will start concrete activities.*

Memo for discussion on the follow-up of the Economic Leading Group,  
discussed during the meeting of the Leading Group on 10 March 2011

The memorandum contained first a number of questions about the past, present and future of the Leading Group. One of the four questions is in the first part of this fragment: "Sustainability is becoming a promising theme with which local economic activity can be promoted above average. Do we think that sustainability should get a more specific role in the next period?". By including this as one of the four discussion questions in the memo on the follow-up of the Leading Group, the municipality, in the person of Ralph, steered the discussion clearly toward the issue of sustainability. From the conversations I had with Ralph (in addition to the interview I also talked to him twice in a more informal setting) it became clear that Ralph was much involved in the issue of sustainability. It seems that he wanted to use this to put the issue of sustainability more on the agenda of the Leading Group. This is also evident from the rest of the memo, in which he states that in the future "the Leading Group will start concrete activities".

However, also other members of the Leading Group recognize the theme of sustainability as a key issue for the Leading Group. Peter for example, as it turns out in the following fragment.

*Mark: "And how did this theme, well, you just asked the question yourself: how did this theme end up on the agenda of the Leading Group?"*

*Peter: "Well, I think that's... I do not know for sure, but in the portfolios of the aldermen some things occurred as well, so during the fall of the college and then, you know, the election of a new college and an intermediate college. So I think, but you might even look at it yourself, it might also have something to do with the political wishes of a certain..."*

*Mark: "Well, [John] has obviously joined as a second alderman, who has sustainability in his portfolio. Yes."*

*Peter: "I think that, that that's the reason. That we have also discussed it quite a few times in terms of purely economic, because it can also lead to jobs and also cost reductions for tenants and residents. So."*

*Mark: "Yes. But primarily, you say, it has been a development in the municipality that then has had an effect on the Leading Group."*

*Peter: "Yes. It may well be that we have also mentioned it ourselves, because it is also something that generates money and.. Yeah, I know: I myself have once, that was in the beginning, said like: well, look, we also have put 3.6 million on our budget as an undefined investment volume, specifically for sustainability projects. We can talk about that, you know, in terms of: is there still money available? Then I said: yes, I still have something. It could also very well be that this has also.. but I think the main reason was that political perspective, I think. Because they are ultimately the agenda setters, you know. As an expert of course you know that that is the most important thing in any decision making process: who sets the agenda?"*

Interview Peter, 25 August 2011

When I ask how the issue of sustainability has ended up on the agenda of the Leading Group, Peter responds primarily that the portfolio allocation of the aldermen seems to have played an important role. He refers to John, who has sustainability in his portfolio and who joined the Leading Group at a later stage: "I think that, that that's the reason." But he also points to his own role: "I myself have once, that was in the beginning, said like: well, look, we also have put 3.6 million on our budget as an undefined investment volume, specifically for sustainability projects. We can talk about that". Different interests in the topic of sustainability seem to come together here: the interest of the municipality, primarily that of John and his portfolio, and the interest of Peter's housing cooperative, that is dealing a lot with the topic of sustainability.

Yet another example of this convergence of interests can be seen in the following fragment from the interview with Iris.

*Mark: "Another theme that is also gaining popularity lately, or is more often addressed, is the theme of sustainability. How do you look at that in the context of this Leading Group? Do you think that is a logical development?"*

*Iris: "Yes, [Dryland] has always cared about sustainability and we, our people are also in that, they are also into that theme. And here sustainability is a bigger issue than even in [another region]."*

*Mark: "Okay. But you say: our people. You mean lecturers?"*

*Iris: "Lecturers and teachers. Comes from environment, comes from the old environmental education. These people all know each other. So that is here also the, well, and it has also become the greenest city. So it has always been a theme here. And the question is whether you, I think you cannot be distinctive on sustainability, because everyone wants that and does that, and the most sustainable building... But sustainability, I said that in the last Leading Group: sustainability is not, it has perhaps emerged from environmentalism, but sustainability is just business. Just absolutely business. If you look at [local installation company], they are only trying to do innovations that are sustainable, but*

*they also sell them. I mean, it is the heart of their business. So I look, so how do you, and if you look at sustainability, of course, that is your operational management, that you have LED bulbs and, that's fine, but the question is whether you see sustainability as a business, well, I don't know how many companies there are in [Dryland] that see that as business, if you could be distinctive with that. But sustainability remains just very, I think it is an important issue for every organization."*

Interview Iris, 28 November 2011

Iris also recognizes the importance of the issue of sustainability for the Leading Group. She indicates that sustainability has always been an important issue in Dryland. She also points at the role of her own college: "our people are also in that, they are also into that theme". Also from the college that Iris represents the issue of sustainability has much attention, and therefore it is a logical step for her to talk about sustainability in the Leading Group.

The discursive practice on the topic of sustainability shows how different vocabularies come together and lead in the discourse of the Leading Group to a new focus on sustainability. Several members of the Leading Group have, each from their own background and their own vocabulary, an interest in sustainability. Their interpretation of it may still differ, but the issue has the attention of several members. In the Leading Group these vocabularies come together and in the discourse of the Leading Group a shared meaning is constructed: the Leading Group should also address aspects of sustainability.

### 6.2.2 Discursive construction of the economic crisis

The economic crisis was obviously a regular topic of conversation in the Leading Group. This had been, after all, the reason to start the Leading Group.

#### 6.2.2.1. Joint construction of the economic situation

During the meetings of the Leading Group the economic crisis was discursively constructed, as shown in the following fragment from a report of one of these meetings.

*The last substantive item on the agenda is "State of the economy in [Dryland]". [Michael] says that one has spoken to each other at the political market, but asks if there are still any additions.*  
*[Ryan] says he thinks the situation is worrisome, so that what we are doing here is therefore important.*  
*[Harold] says that the silver linings are magnified, but that it remains worrisome. There is a double dip. In [Dryland] there are a lot of contacts with each other, this offers opportunities. We must use this.*  
*[Henry] briefly mentions some sectors. The hospitality sector, despite the bad weather in the summer, is growing again.*  
*[Michael] responds that he has had a conversation with a director of KLM, who expected that the tourism sector in [Dryland] would have a difficult time, just like KLM. [Michael] had replied that [Dryland] probably benefits from the trouble KLM is in, because [Dryland] profits from day tourism in particular.*  
*[Harold] mentions the evaluation of [name of local event]: more visitors and more sales.*

During this meeting, on 11 October 2011, there was a separate item on the agenda called "State of the economy in [Dryland]". This item was almost always on the agenda, and was intended to discuss the current situation. A clear example of discursive practice, because in these discussions meaning was given to what everyone saw happening at that moment. This fragment shows clearly how this went. Michael, as chairman, successively gave the floor to the various members of the Leading Group. They then gave, from their own backgrounds and their own experiences, their impressions of the state of the local economy. For Ryan and Harold, it is in this fragment not immediately clear that they speak from their own background, but for Henry it is. He is chairman of the local association of entrepreneurs and talks about some sectors that are represented in his association. The reaction of Michael, as alderman for Economic Affairs, is a clear example of how his impressions are based on his own experiences. He recounts a conversation he had with a director of KLM recently. He uses this conversation as an example to show what the state of the local economy in Dryland is according to him. Harold also mentions at the end of this fragment a concrete example of a local event that has had more visitors and more sales. For him this apparently is also an indicator of the state of the economy.

The different voices in this fragment show an interesting development of the discourse. The discourse of the economic crisis develops in this fragment in a certain direction. It starts with Ryan, who has a negative impression: the situation is "worrisome". Then Harold reacts, who also says that the situation is "worrisome". He even talks about a "double dip". However, he adds that there are some "silver linings", and that the contacts that exist in Dryland provide "opportunities". Then Henry reacts, who is a little more positive. He is not talking about opportunities, but he says that the hospitality sector "is growing again". Michael then responds with the conversation he had with a KLM director. The point of this is that Dryland is actually doing better than one might expect from the outside. Finally, Harold responds again, this time with a concrete positive example of a local event that has been a success, with "more visitors and more sales." In the conversation, a development can be seen from negative terms, "worrying" and "double dip", to positive terms, "growing" and "more sales". This is clearly an example of discursive practice: members of the Leading Group were searching for a shared sense of what they saw around them and created a meaning together that eventually (in this fragment) was rather positive.

#### 6.2.2.2. The changing discourse about the economic crisis

The meaning of the economic crisis was constructed in the Leading Group through discursive practice. However, during my research this meaning was also developing. This can particularly be seen in some of the interviews, in which members of the Leading Group looked back at the developments in the Leading Group and in the economic crisis. A first example is from the interview with Fay.

*Fay: "Well, I say: actually, that crisis is now turning into the regular economy. And that economy is really changing. And everyone sees that. And that is no longer thinking about another sector of which I think: can I give it an impulse? But everyone also sees it within his own company. You know, a cooperative sees it, we see it, everything is drying up, so everyone should think fundamentally about: where are we aiming for? Well, on the one hand that can really clean up, in the sense that: then you will, you will come into tougher negotiations, but it will be clearer, I think. But you will have to choose. And I, look, I find it exciting: are we really enough connected to each other to understand: if you do not do it together, you cannot do it alone? And I can really see that happening in a different setting. I am also, for example, I participate in a pilot of co-creation for sustainability and you can see that coming up, that together we do begin to realize that if we do certain things together, we will get out of it and if you do it on your own you will never get out of it."*

Interview Fay, 12 January 2011

Fay says in this fragment: "that crisis is now turning into the regular economy. And that economy is really changing." She expresses here the movement of the economic crisis as a temporary dip into a structural change. The whole economy is changing. She also links it to the Leading Group, because she emphasizes the importance of cooperation to cope with the crisis.

Also in the interview with John, the second alderman in the Leading Group, this movement came back.

*Mark: "And what is the role of the municipality as a partner in the Leading Group, you think? Is there, you know, on the one hand you can say: the municipality is, for example, in the lead, determines what happens in the Leading Group, or on the other, the other extreme might be that you say: no, we are one of the partners, we are in this together and we are also only one of the parties. Or somewhere in between?"*

*John: "I will answer your question in a different way. A detour. I have the impression, from what I heard from [name former alderman / chairman of the Leading Group], that they wanted to have short-term achievements in times of crisis. Short-term successes. Quick wins. You asked before about the composition of the Leading Group. Perhaps they also looked at it that way, but now I'm just guessing. We are now two, three years into this crisis and we must start looking more at the long term. And that is the change we have to make, I think. We have two or three years ahead of us in this crisis, and then it will go better. I think. Everyone thinks that. We must bridge that. So we need to start looking at the challenge in a different way, with a different perspective."*

*Mark: "And what is needed to make this change?"*

*John: (laughs) "A certain common sense at that point, of course, you know. You have to want that together. I cannot say that they do not want that. But we have agreed that we will have a kind of evaluation, you know, I have not seen that on the agenda, moreover, we still have a meeting of the Economic Leading Group I believe?"*

*Mark: "Yes, that's tomorrow."*

*John: "I have not read the documents yet. Last weekend I was out, so I'm a little bit going from day to day. We need to talk about these things I think. The Economic Leading Group is no one-hit wonder. The challenge is more structural."*

*(Secretary comes in to submit something to [John])*

*"Whereas recently we did not know whether that crisis would last long or short, now it is at least clear that you do talk about quite a few years. Then you need to act in line with that."*

Interview John, 9 March 2011

John describes here the movement from the beginning of the Leading Group, when he himself was not present. Back then it was focused on "Short-term successes. Quick wins". Now, according to John, one should "start looking more at the long term." "Whereas recently we did not know whether that crisis would last long or short, now it is at least clear that you do talk about quite a few years. Then you need to act in line with that." John expresses here the situation as he sees it, he seems not yet convinced that others in the Leading Group see it accordingly. In other words, it is in his experience no shared discourse. John indicates that "a certain common sense" is needed to make the change in thinking together. A common sense, which apparently is not there yet in his experience. He hopes that the evaluation of the Leading Group that has yet to be done will lead to such a common sense, a shared meaning. Yet the movement that John describes can also be seen in other interviews. There seemed indeed to exist some common sense, maybe it was just not yet expressed and had not yet become a shared meaning within the discourse of the Leading Group.

John and Fay still saw light at the end of the tunnel, they were both talking about 'getting out of the crisis', but there were also members of the Leading Group who had a somewhat more negative impression. They also saw the movement of the crisis from temporary into structural, but they did not speak about the end of the crisis. A first example of this is the following fragment from the interview with Peter.

*Mark: "If you look at the economic crisis, ultimately the cause for this Leading Group. You've just told something about how you, how you looked at it then and the main goal.. If you look at the situation now: what would be, considering the current situation of the crisis, be the most important, well, what could or should be the focus or major goal of the Leading Group?"*

*Peter: "Well, I think the most fatalistic view that I, scenario I see is that the crisis is permanent. So that it's not just a temporary thing that we have to master, and that in about three or four years we are at the same level of prosperity and then the economic growth will go sky high again. I actually do not believe that. I believe we owe much of the prosperity that we have now to the huge amount of loans that we have together, I believe that the Netherlands currently accounts for 3.300 billion euros on credit. Of this, 500 billion is government debt and the rest are private debt. We have here in this company also 3 or 400 million from the bank, you know, and maybe you have a mortgage, I have a mortgage, so all those things added together will ultimately lead to that amount, that indescribable high amount, we are fifth in line of the most indebted countries in the world, we are in fifth place."*



*We are solvent enough in the sense of, we have sufficient liquidity to pay our principal and interest, but the amount is obviously immensely large. I think we will not get over that, I'm not going to live to see that in my life, I expect. So I see prosperity decline as a real scenario. Not just fatalistic, but even a real scenario. How far and how much, I do not know yet. So we will all have to tighten our belts. That means that consumption, in part overconsumption, let's take our cooperative, the overconsumption of housing, that is: everyone prefers to live in a single-family house for 500 euros rent and then with 200 euro subsidy, so they only have to pay 300 euros net, I think that time has passed. We have long been able to do it like that together, but if I build a house right now, then I'm 80,000 unprofitable, I'll never get that back. We won't be able to manage that in the long run anymore. So we will, the qualitative question, not only for housing but also for cars, I don't know, it will have to go back. So our consumption should go down. So one of the things we need to consider the next period is: how can we, in a very decent manner, and also with a kind of proportional distribution of the pain, where the strongest shoulders for my part, really old-fashioned social democratic, I do not agree but I do agree with this, the strongest shoulders should bear the heaviest burdens, how can we make a soft landing? Because our prosperity is decreasing. How can we do that in a decent way? And, so I'm not so much looking for a recovery, but for managing the downturn. That seems to be the main challenge for the Economic Leading Group in this town, but anyway."*

Interview Peter, 25 August 2011

Peter gives his impression here "that the crisis is permanent". The question that the Leading Group should focus on is: "how can we make a soft landing?". Peter as well gives the impression of the crisis that is increasingly becoming a long-term phenomenon. Just like John, it seems as if Peter has also the idea that this is his personal opinion, but that it is not yet shared by others. Nevertheless, the various interview fragments that I use here show, that the development of the discourse of the crisis as something temporary to the crisis as something long-term or even permanent is indeed recognized by various members of the Leading Group. There seems indeed to be a shared meaning, a shared discourse.

Peter does take this slightly further than Fay and John. He's not talking about an end to the crisis, but described the crisis as "permanent" and believes that one will have to get used to an economy that will continue at a lower level. The question is not how to get out of the crisis again, but "how can we make a soft landing?". A similar impression is also given by Iris in the interview I had with her.

*Mark: "But the sense of urgency from the crisis was decreasing, that was..."*

*Iris: "Yes, at some point you think: so what can we still contribute here?"*

*Mark: "And how is that now? Is that still the case, or...?"*

*Iris: "Yes, that crisis is urgent in certain sectors, of course, you know. But it's become a bit of chronic, you know. Become a bit of a chronic disease, I believe, so... And I know that some sectors are worried, the whole construction sector still. And everything that's supplying to it. So it's not over."*

*Mark: "But the idea was perhaps in the beginning that the crisis would last shorter and..."*

*Iris: "That's what I think. I think everyone was startled amazing with what happened, and: can we hold on to each other, and keep an eye on bankruptcies and stuff? That's now, well, it has changed."*

Interview Iris, 28 November 2011

Iris articulates here in other terms the same development that Peter also outlined in the previous fragment. She refers to it as: "it's become a bit of chronic". She describes the economic crisis as a "chronic disease", which also changed the dynamics of the Leading Group. One was not so much concerned with short-term solutions, but one was more looking at the longer term. As Peter, who talked about the crisis as "permanent", Iris sees no end to the crisis. She uses the terms "chronic disease", from which the impression comes forward of a crisis that has no end.

In the above fragments, in different terms, the movement can be seen of the economic crisis as a temporary phenomenon to the crisis as a structural phenomenon. Between different members there were some differences in the exact words that they chose. Fay and John still talked about a longer-term crisis, but one where the end was in sight. However, Peter ("permanent") and Iris ("chronic disease") had a more negative impression. The movement is recognizable, but the nuance is different. It seems that the timing of the interviews also played a role in this. The fragments I used above are in chronological order. The interview with Fay was on 12 January 2011, the interview with John on 9 March 2011, the interview with Peter on 25 August 2011 and the interview with Iris on 28 November 2011. It is possible that the differences in nuance also reflect the development of the discourse in the Leading Group during the year that I've done my research. This would mean that the development of the discourse of the crisis as a temporary phenomenon to a structural phenomenon has also continued in the period that I did my research. The process of discursive practice is well recognizable herein, in the search for the meaning of the crisis that took place in the Leading Group from the period of the emergence of the Leading Group to the period of my research. During the meetings of the Leading Group and also in the conversations around it one searched for words to express the meaning of the economic crisis.

### 6.2.3      *The roles of the members of the Leading Group*

The Leading Group in Dryland consisted of several members. These were representatives of the municipality and various social partners of the municipality. The roles of these different members in the Leading Group and the mode of cooperation was also a regular topic of discussion during my research. Again, people were looking for a shared meaning of the phenomenon Leading Group itself. This was not only about the purpose and function of the Leading Group, which I already discussed above, but one also searched for a shared sense of everyone's role. In the meetings of the Leading Group this issue was not often discussed explicitly, but in the interviews it was.

6.2.3.1. The role of the municipality in the Economic Leading Group

John, as representative of the municipality, joined later. In the interview with him the role of the municipality, in relation to that of the other parties, was mentioned.

*Mark: "But how, look, in the Leading Group the municipality is chair, in the person of [Michael], most representatives are also from the municipality. Do you think that it is a, say, a club of the municipality, where you invite other parties to join and then to do something together, or do you say: well, we consider ourselves as one of the social players in the field who search for contacts, but we don't consider ourselves so much as instigators or directors? What do you think of that?"*

*John: "Well, the answer lies already in the question, is it not? We have of course approached it from a kind of equivalence: different players in the field, the government is one of them. We are perhaps initiating to work with such a Leading Group. Ultimately you have to do it together. We do not have a director's role or a primate or a special responsibility. I mean: that we cannot live up to that. We will have to do it together. So that fiction of equality and togetherness, that is very important. But if you look at who is actually sitting at the table, there are sometimes a lot of people from the municipality, I've discovered."*

Interview John, 9 March 2011

John believes that the Leading Group should be a common thing: "Ultimately you have to do it together". However, he is more critical of how things actually go. It is interesting how he expressed the importance of cooperation in the Leading Group: "So that fiction of equality and togetherness, that is very important". The fact that John speaks about "fiction" already indicates that he sees that it is different in practice. "But if you look at who is actually sitting at the table, there are sometimes a lot of people from the municipality, I've discovered." Although the municipality has chosen to meet alternately at locations of the various members of the Leading Group, John notices that there are many representatives of the municipality in the Leading Group. And this is for him apparently an argument to speak about the "fiction of equality and togetherness".

The role of the municipality of Dryland in the Leading Group was also discussed in the interviews with the representatives of other parties than the municipality. Below is a fragment from the interview with Peter, the director of a housing cooperative.

*Mark: "Well, that is indeed.. well look, logical: [Ralph] sets the agenda. But how.. in terms of dynamics in the Leading Group, is the municipality indeed the most defining party?"*

*Peter: "Yes. Because.. Yes, definitely. Because the municipality both sets the agenda and delivers the chairman and writes the documents that we discuss. So yeah, I do not know how much, how much more you want to hear, but it seems to me that this is a very determining factor. And they were the one who managed at one point to allocate half a million. So actually the budget owner, the alderman. Well, so then you have both money and the agenda and the report and, well, and so on."*

Mark: *"Yes. What do you think of that? If you just look at..."*

Peter: *"Well, I think it's fine, because I.. look, the.. I think it's fine, because I believe that the municipality has the best overview, has most of the data and information about what happens in the society of [Dryland]. In terms of school dropout, unemployment, bankruptcies, new companies that have applied for a license here, that knowledge is mainly available at the municipality. So the municipality is to me the spider in the web, and it should make sure that it gathers the right flies around the web to continue to play that game. And if some flies are not doing well, they have to throw off those flies and get new flies. I think it's fine. So I think it's good."*

Interview Peter, 25 August 2011

The municipality is according to Peter significantly the most influential party, because of the different roles of the (representatives of the) municipality: chairman (Michael), secretary (Ralph) and financial sponsor (the city council): "then you have both money and the agenda and the report and, well, and so on". For Peter, this is sufficient to state that the municipality is the most influential party. But, unlike Fay and John, he does not consider this as a problem: "I think it's fine, because I believe that the municipality has the best overview, has most of the data and information about what happens in the society of [Dryland]". Peter apparently does not think that the Leading Group should be a cooperation of equal parties. To him it is logical that the municipality has a leading role.

Iris seems to have a similar opinion, considering the following interview fragment.

Iris: *"It was instigated by civil servants, yes. And everyone thought it was so important that everyone always tried to be present. No matter how strange the times were. So there was definitely some kind of sense of urgency: I have to be there."*

Mark: *"Yes. And has that always been kind of a natural thing that the municipality had a leading role in this, or has that ever been discussed?"*

Iris: *"No. Actually not."*

Mark: *"No. And what do you think of that? Do you think that is a good role or...?"*

Iris: *"I thought that was good. Yes. Because it was also about the municipality of [Dryland]. So the fact that they took the lead, that was not so strange to me. No. It felt rather natural. It would have been weird if we had done that. That would have been impossible."*

Mark: *"Well..."*

Iris: *"[name of local association of employers] and [name of local SME's] could have done it together, but they have no staff, that's all..."*

Mark: *"Yeah, that's a..."*

Iris: *"There is absolutely, I mean, if I see [name of local association of employers], there is no support. So, and there are many civil servants at the City Hall, you know, who..."*

Mark: *"That's true, they have..."*

Iris: *"And the economic sector that is paid to do this, so I think that makes sense."*

Interview Iris, 28 November 2011

Iris says that the municipality has had a leading role from the start, particularly the representative civil servants Fay and Ralph. Like Peter, she does not see this as a problem. She says: "I thought that was good. Yes. Because it was also about the municipality of [Dryland]. So the fact that they took the lead, that was not so strange to me. No. It felt rather natural. It would have been weird if we had done that. That would have been impossible." The last sentence in particular is interesting here. Whereas John suggested that "the fiction of equality and togetherness" was very important, Iris says that it "would have been impossible" if the municipality had not taken the lead. Apparently, there was no shared view on the role of the municipality in the Leading Group. Whereas the representatives of the municipality wanted to see the Leading Group as a joint initiative, the representatives of the other parties saw the Leading Group mainly as an initiative of the municipality in which they participated.

#### 6.2.3.2. Input from other parties

Regarding the role of the municipality in the Leading Group, the shared discourse appeared to be that the municipality was the initiator and responsible. However, this does not mean that the other parties did not have a role in the Leading Group. The ways in which they fulfilled their roles differed. A first example is from the report of the meeting of the Leading Group on 28 April 2011.

*[Michael] continues with the next point: setting the agenda. [Ryan] says he would like to add another item at point 6 (Joint approach to the draft of the economical business plan [Dryland] 2020): the implementation of the procurement policy of the municipality of [Dryland]. This is added as point 6a.*

Report Leading Group meeting, 28 April 2011

In this fragment from the meeting of the Leading Group on 28 April 2011, Ryan asks to add an additional item to the agenda. This Ryan represented a platform of employers in the engineering sector in Dryland and was director of a local installation company. He had a rather active role in the meetings of the Leading Group was relatively often saying something. This was also mentioned by various members of the Leading Group in the interviews I had with them. Ryan was at times also quite critical of the role of the municipality. This is also evident in this fragment. He wants to discuss the municipal procurement policy, because he thinks that the municipality of Dryland can help local entrepreneurs by relaxing the municipal procurement policy. He had also mentioned this earlier in one of the meetings of the Leading Group. During this meeting, Ryan tries to draw extra attention to his point by putting it as a separate item on the agenda. He has the disadvantage that the municipality sets the agenda for the meetings of the Leading Group. Peter mentioned this in an earlier quoted interview fragment: because the municipality sets the agenda of the Leading Group, it is the most influential party in the Leading Group. However, Ryan will not be put off by this, but he asks at the beginning of the meeting to include this point as an additional item on the agenda. Because of this his item will be discussed anyway.

There are other ways in which members of the Leading Group fulfill their role. The following fragment is from my report of the meeting of 16 December 2010.

*The last item on the agenda is 'Proposal for the Fair/marketplace of [Dryland]'. For this item someone from [name of association of local SMEs] has joined at the table: [Mitch]. He says that they have taken the initiative to organize a business-to-business fair. He mentions that something similar happens also in some smaller communities in the area. There are a lot of new businesses in [Dryland], but there is still a lot of mutual ignorance. He briefly explains the concept of the fair. There will be an inspiration session, several workshops aimed at sharing knowledge, the fair itself, and the election of the entrepreneur of the year of [Dryland] (in three categories: general, Socially Responsible Entrepreneur, and starter). The proposed location is [name of the institution for higher education], and the fair should take place in late March 2011. There is room for 36 stands, which are especially meant for [name of association of local SMEs].*

*[Mary] asks if balloting is done. [Mitch] replies that this is the case: there will be looked at diversification across sectors and spread in the topics of the workshops. At this moment they are in the starting blocks, waiting for the input of the municipality so that they can start approaching local sponsors and after that also entrepreneurs. [Henry] adds that [Michael] (who has already left the meeting) whispered to him that same afternoon that he had money: € 15,000.*

Leading Group meeting report, 16 December 2010

During this meeting of the Leading Group an initiative of the association of local SMEs is discussed. They want to organize a fair / marketplace in Dryland. This is an event where local entrepreneurs can meet each other. It is therefore an event that is quite interesting for the adherents of the association of local SMEs, but that they want to organize from the Leading Group. Unlike Ryan in the previous example, Henry, who is representing the association of local SMEs in the Leading Group, has apparently had prior contact with the municipality so that this item is already on the agenda. He also has asked a colleague of his, Mitch, to come along during the meeting and explain the initiative. Mitch presents a rather detailed plan, to which the other members of the Leading Group enthusiastically respond. Henry appears also to have spoken to Iris about using the college as a venue for the event, and to Michael about funding from the municipality.

Whereas Ryan in the previous fragment chose to bring his issue pretty unprepared in the discourse of the Leading Group, this is an example of a different tactic. Henry chooses to bring his item into the discourse from different adjacent discourses. He prepares the subject extensively, before he has it put on the agenda of the Leading Group. During the meetings themselves Henry spoke relatively little, even in this meeting he gives the floor mainly to his colleague Mitch. Henry was even not present in some of the meetings of the Leading Group that I attended. Yet he fulfilled his role in the Leading Group, mainly by bringing his items into the discourses surrounding the Leading Group. This was also seen by others, as evidenced by the following fragment from the interview with Michael.

*Michael: "[name of association of local SMEs] has picked that up very actively, especially in the period of the actual measures. There you will also see that a lot of the budget went to projects that are put forward by them. But that was because they themselves had that proactive attitude and also the input. They came up with concrete plans. We have, those voucher systems, those are actually individual grants to entrepreneurs. You know, they had to buy that grant, they also had to do something themselves. But in the end it has been set up as a subsidy to [name of association of local SMEs], and they did all of the implementation, settlement, control, they did all of that. And that's really the partnership you want to realize. So that you don't do it all by yourself as a government, but that you appeal to the responsibility of both residents, but also businesses and institutions: if you find that important, then you should also do something yourself."*

*Mark: "Yes. And then you reward it, so to say, well, now that you had half a million, you can also see: well, a large part of it goes to the [name of association of local SMEs], because they have put a lot of effort in it?"*

*Michael: "Yes. Well, I mean, I don't know if that is really rewarding. We did not actually make the consideration: well, [name of association of local SMEs] is so committed, so they get... no, we just assessed the individual projects to see whether we found them important, and then the budget... but then you see that, ultimately, where are those amounts spent? That [name of association of local SMEs] has strongly benefited from it."*

Interview Michael, 24 January 2011

Michael mentions in this fragment the role of the association of local SMEs, represented by Henry: they "picked that up very actively, especially in the period of the actual measures". Michael mentions an example from the first phase of the Leading Group, when they were primarily engaged in the design and implementation of concrete measures to mitigate the effects of the crisis. For this the budget of half a million, made available by the municipality, could be used. Henry's association of local SMEs then came up with the idea of a voucher system for entrepreneurs. From the interviews and documents of the Leading Group, this system proved to have been one of the best-known actions of the Leading Group in the initial phase. It was also the measure on which most of the budget of the Leading Group was spent. Michael concludes: "but then you see that, ultimately, where are those amounts spent? That [name of association of local SMEs] has strongly benefited from it". Also here it becomes clear how Henry interfered in a smart way in the discourse of the Leading Group, by coming up with concrete proposals. These were incorporated into the discourse of the Leading Group and implemented as proposals from the Leading Group.

Despite the fact that the municipality played a decisive role in the Leading Group in a number of areas, and was seen by the other parties as initiator and responsible party, other parties also fulfilled their role in the Leading Group. The decisive factor here was the extent to which their interests were given a place in the discursive practice of the Leading Group. This often appeared

only afterwards. Michael finds in the above fragment afterwards that a large part of the budget of the Leading Group has gone to measures that served the interests of the association of local SMEs. This was not a predetermined specific strategy from the Leading Group, but the outcome of the discursive practice that had taken place within the Leading Group. In this discursive practice, the members of the Leading Group together gave meaning to the economic crisis and chose certain activities. Afterwards the role of the various players and how they fulfilled their roles can be seen.

#### 6.2.3.3. Co-creation

A final issue in which the discursive practice in the Leading Group can be seen is 'co-creation'. This topic was discussed a lot throughout the period that I followed the Leading Group and implied that that the parties represented in the Leading Group were intended to compose a joint vision for Dryland. During the meeting of the Leading Group on 10 March 2011 the continuation of the Economic Leading Group was an item on the agenda. For this, a discussion paper was prepared by Ralph. This paper contained some discussion questions.

The following fragment from my report of this meeting is about the discussion of it.

*[Michael] skips questions 2 and 3 of the discussion paper and goes to question 4: "Is it clear to all members of the Leading Group that it is the intention of the council to compose the economic vision in co-creation with business? Is it clear to everyone that this implies an introduction based on equality of the investment tasks and the responsibility for joint realization of them?". He explains that the intention is to work on the vision based on co-creation. This requires something from the council and the college of aldermen, namely relinquishing control. It also asks something of the partners, namely the commitment to perform together.*

*[Harold] wonders what kind of investment is exactly asked from the partners: financial, knowledge, being an employer? [Fay] reacts with an additional explanation of the various levels of cooperation. Traditionally, the municipality operates according to level 1. It has never gone beyond level 3. Level 4 means an active investment in the implementation, especially when it comes to the subject of the economy. In the field of the economy, the municipality can in fact only stimulate, never really do something by itself. [Harold] responds that the question remains how the demanded investment is materialized: after all, the poor construction sector means already an investment from the sector, where the municipality already benefits from lower than expected procurement. [Michael] responds that there are no prior financial investments required, but that they are expected to actively participate in the process. [Mary] thinks that investments should not only be translated into financial investments. [Fay] responds that it is not about financial investments.*

*[...]*

*[Michael] says it's probably good to further concretize what co-creation requires from the parties ([Ryan] and [Mary] agree with this). This need not always be financial, but also for example knowledge. It is important that an appeal can be made to the contribution of the parties. He promises to come up with a concrete elaboration of this.*

Leading Group meeting report, 10 March 2011

The question that was discussed here was one of the four discussion questions that were prepared by the municipality to speak about the continuation of the Economic Leading Group. Hereby the



municipality clearly tried to steer the continuation of the Leading Group in a certain direction. What is also striking is that the question whether the Leading Group should at all be engaged in the preparation of the economic vision in co-creation, was not asked. The question was whether it was clear to the members that this was the plan, and whether they realized what the corresponding roles of each were. Michael, as chairman, addresses the question about co-creation. He briefly explains the question on behalf of the municipality. From the other members of the Leading Group, Harold and Mary respond to the question. Both reactions are reluctant and address the issue of what the plan of co-creation asks from the other parties in terms of investment. This creates some discussion about the word "investment": should it be understood purely financially or could the investments of the members also be of a different nature? These reactions, however, also show the reluctance of the other members towards the plans, that are still mainly the plans of the municipality. The plans are clearly not yet a shared discourse. Despite the efforts of the municipality to determine the discourse on this issue, through the memo prepared by Ralph and the explanations of Michael and Fay during the meeting, the other members appear to not just come along. The discursive practice clearly has its own dynamics and can not easily be determined by one party. The discussion on this topic is therefore concluded with the Michael's remark that "it's probably good to further concretize what co-creation requires from the parties" and the promise that he will come up with an elaboration of this in the following meeting.

Ultimately, the question was whether the proposal of co-creation could become a shared discourse. In the meetings, formally there appeared to grow an agreement with the proposed method by the municipality. Whether this would also lead to 'practice', with the corresponding roles of the various members, was still the question. For that a shared discourse was needed. In this light the following fragment is interesting, from the interview I had with Peter a few months after the above-mentioned meeting of the Leading Group. This interview took place on 25 August 2011.

Mark:	<i>"But now, among other things you are now dealing with that economic vision, right, to draft it..."</i>
Peter:	<i>"The municipality is working on it and we are being consulted, right, that is how I think you should see it."</i>
Mark:	<i>"Yes, well, the municipality is trying, you know, with the ladder of 'how closely do you work together?', they are very much on the level of co-creation, you know, of really wanting to do it together."</i>
Peter:	<i>"Yes. Beautiful, isn't it?" (laughs)</i>
Mark:	<i>(laughs) "This says something, I think. No, but how do you look at that? Because if I see it, then..."</i>
Peter:	<i>"Well, you know, that co-creation is just another word, such a fashion thing, what is it exactly? Literally it is to create something together, but I think it is mostly they who do something, and we will react. I have not yet been invited to jointly, say, to make the economic vision. I have not done that, that has not happened."</i>
Mark:	<i>"Would you like to?"</i>

*Peter: "No, as I said: I'm not an expert in this field. You really should not let me do that. We as a housing cooperative do not have the people to do that. We are good at public housing, but of course we do have an understanding of the business, and so I would like it if we would be in a first draft, a first reaction, and then there comes a second draft, a second reaction, like that. And so if you interpret co-creation that way, so that someone makes a start and the other responds, I think that's totally awesome. I am also very much in favor of that. And not just because I get to give my opinion, but because I feel that: if we all together in this society give our opinions, then it becomes also something from the people here in [Dryland]. And I think that the approach we choose will also have to be rooted in this society. And if the municipality invents something that we find abject, well, and then you miss the biggest investor in your town. And that is not very convenient. So it seems to me appropriate for the municipality to engage us."*

*Mark: "Yes, so to engage, but the municipality is ultimately..."*

*Peter: "Yes, and if you mean by co-creation: well, you know, we propose something and you react to it, but that's different than that I start thinking together with the municipality about: which principles do we choose, from what values do we reason, where do we lay the focus, so to say, with what priority, along which timeframe? I have at least not yet had that conversation here. So I also do not assume that we will have that. And I think that is good."*

Interview Peter, 25 August 2011

In this fragment, I ask Peter about the economic vision that 'they' are composing. Peter's response is remarkable: "The municipality is working on it and we are being consulted, right, that is how I think you should see it." If I then point to the plan of the municipality to do this in co-creation, Peter's reaction is significant. Laughing, he says: "Yes. Beautiful isn't it?". These two reactions show that the (largely tacit) agreement on the proposal in the meeting of 28 April 2011 did not mean that there was indeed a shared discourse. Peter clearly expresses a different sound. He clearly gives a different meaning to the concept of co-creation: "Literally it is to create something together, but I think it is mostly they who do something, and we will react." The active role that the municipality would like to see from the other members, is still not recognized as such, at least not by Peter. He wants to join, but from a less active role than the municipality proposes. He thinks that his role, as well as that of the other members besides the municipality, should be one of thinking along and responding: "if you interpret co-creation that way, so that someone makes a start and the other responds, I think that's totally awesome".

### **6.3 Findings of power through structure and agency in Dryland**

Like the stories about the Task Force in Highwater, the stories about the Leading Group in Dryland give an answer to the central question of this research: "How do municipalities with their partners make sense of the economic crisis?". This answer can partly be given based on the story from a

structure perspective, partly from the story from an agency perspective, but often both perspectives are closely connected.

#### 6.3.1      *Local discourses that influence the course of the Leading Group*

The story of the Economic Leading Group in Dryland, told from the structure perspective, showed how different existing discourses, at various levels, influenced or perhaps even at times determined the process of the Leading Group. These existing discourses sometimes existed at a local level. The Economic and Social Thermometer is an example of this. Local statistics, gathered by the municipality, clearly influenced the discourse in the Leading Group on the state of the economy. Another example is the local process of public savings. The local discourse on the impact of the public savings, but also the interactive approach that the municipality had chosen, affected the progress of the Leading Group and its choice for co-creation. There were also some discourses from the municipality, about the vision for the future of Dryland that was written earlier and about the coalition agreement that was made after the last local elections. These discourses strongly influenced the developments in the Leading Group.

It is interesting to see that, although these were existing discourses influencing the Leading Group as discourse-in-practice, there was also a process of discursive practice in which these discourses were 'translated' or 'processed' in the conversations that took place in the Leading Group. In these conversations, described in the story from an agency perspective, different vocabularies of the members of the Leading Group came together and one came to a (new) shared meaning through a process of discursive practice. This was demonstrated, for example, in the discourse about the economic crisis. By discussing the state of the economy in the Leading Group, different experiences and perceptions of the members of the Leading Group came together. In the discussions about the state of the economy the statistical data from the Economic and Social Thermometer were used as the starting point of the conversation, but elements of these data were picked out and further interpreted based on personal experiences and perceptions. It was clear to see how, over and over again, the members of the Leading Group were searching together for a meaning of the economic crisis. Was it going worse? Was it going better? During the discussion, the image sometimes switched from negative to positive, or vice versa, depending on how the conversation, the discursive practice, developed. There was clearly an interplay between structure and agency: broader and existing discourses gave a framework within which the discursive practice, based on personal backgrounds, interests and experiences, took place.

#### 6.3.2      *(Inter)national discourses that influenced the discursive process in the Leading Group*

The discursive process in the Leading Group in Dryland was influenced by several existing and broader discourses. Some examples were discourses from the world of media and academics. For

example, in the discussion about the state of the economy, via the Economic and Social Thermometer, reference was made to messages from the Dutch Bureau of Statistics on the economic situation in the Netherlands. Also, an article from a Dutch newspaper was cited to determine the state of the economy. When discussing the impact of the Leading Group on the economy someone referred to the sociologist Durkheim and to professor Hugo Priemus.

There were also discourses that existed at an international level, or that could even be seen as general discourses without a clearly defined playing field. One can think of the discourse from Northern England about the "credit crunch", which played an important role in the creation of the Leading Group, or the European debate on state aid in relation to the impact of the Leading Group on the economy. And more generally the broad discourse on the economic crisis. At the start of the Leading Group people spoke about "the great danger" of the crisis and "municipalities should do something", later the broad discourse shifted in the direction of the crisis as something of a more long-term and perhaps even structural character. This broad discourse on the economic crisis cannot clearly be traced back to a specific source, often there was also no reference to specific individuals who voiced the discourse. It was more of a commonly shared discourse, which clearly had its impact on the development of the Leading Group. Other examples of this type of broad discourse that were difficult to trace back to a specific group of people or specific spokesmen were the discourses on co-creation and sustainability. Here as well people talked about them mostly in terms of general trends and widely shared beliefs. But precisely because these discourses were experienced as widely shared, their impact on the Leading Group was extra strong. It was precisely because of this that the members of the Leading Group felt they had to join these broader developments. This last group of discourses has therefore maybe even had the greatest influence on the developments in the Leading Group.

What is striking is that the more general and anonymous structures or discourses are, the greater their power appears to be. It is the commonly shared discourses, without clear delineation or origin, that seem to have a big impact on the Leading Group. The broader and more general the discourse, the stronger its structural nature. It is these discourses that are experienced as 'given'. From 'smaller' existing discourses, for example, originating from national or even local politics, one can easier disassociate oneself. For example, one may have a different political background and therefore disassociate oneself from a discourse (see the example of John who is opposed to the political discourse of the new government). Or, one can see a local discourse as 'something from the municipality' and argue that as a representative of another organization one is not bound to it (as happened in the discussions about co-creation, for as far as the members of the Leading Group saw this as a discourse from the municipality and not as a broader trend). The 'larger' discourses are more difficult to disassociate from, as these discourses cannot be attributed to specific groups from which one can distance oneself. The discourse is elusive and is not in question. It is precisely

by these discourses that people are often influenced unconsciously. People are often aware of the fact that they are influenced by smaller discourses, but this is much less the case for larger discourses. This has to do precisely with the obvious character of them. This is also evident from the way in which reference was made in the Leading Group to this kind of discourses: "It is clear that...", "Everyone notices that...", "You can see that...". These words show a naturalness for which no explanation or justification is required.

### 6.3.3      *The influence of the composition of the Leading Group on its course*

The story about Dryland from an agency perspective shows the exercise of power through the process of discursive practice, in the discourse on the different roles of the members of the Leading Group. Here it was clear how the vocabularies of the different members of the Leading Group were quite different. There was a clear difference between the municipality of Dryland on the one hand, that considered the Leading Group as a joint initiative in which the parties all had an active role and worked together on an equal basis, and on the other hand the other parties that considered the Leading Group as an initiative of the municipality of Dryland in which they thought along and responded to the plans of the municipality. These different vocabularies were especially in the interviews clearly recognizable, but also in the meetings of the Leading Group they could be seen, explicitly or implicitly. The municipality clearly tried to influence the discourse in these examples. They tried to emphasize the mutual equivalence by having the meetings in different locations, they tried to put co-creation on the agenda by including it in the questions in the evaluation document of the Leading Group, next they tried to start the process of co-creation by explaining it in the documents and even by having an additional representative from the municipality participate in the Leading Group. But despite all the efforts of the municipality, the other members kept seeing the Leading Group mainly as something from the municipality, to which they contributed. And the theme of co-creation had a somewhat slow start, with a lot of extra effort and initiative from the municipality (which is in fact in contradiction with the principle of co-creation). Despite all the efforts of the municipality, they clearly could not exercise power over the discourse or over the other parties. This power was exercised in the process of discursive practice. There it was determined what happened. And although all parties contributed to this process, the municipality perhaps even more than the other parties, still the power was in the process of discursive practice itself.



## 7 What's the story?

This chapter concludes this book on my research about sensemaking of the economic crisis in the municipalities of Dryland and Highwater. In this chapter I will answer the central question I posed in the first chapter. Several parts of the story, from the theoretical chapters 1-4 and from the empirical chapters 5 and 6, come together in this concluding chapter.

### **7.1 *Crisis? What crisis?! A theoretical answer***

The central question of this research was: "How do municipalities with their partners make sense of the economic crisis?". I introduced this question in the first chapter of this book, but already there I explained that this had not been the central question from the beginning of my research. I described in chapter 1 how my research has been a search, and that only in the end phase of it the central question could be determined. My research has changed, one might perhaps say developed or evolved, during the period I have been working on it. Looking back, the central question of it can be formulated as: "How do municipalities with their partners make sense of the economic crisis?".

The answer to this question is a combination of the different perspectives that have been used in this book. From the theoretical part of this book, chapters 1-4, a more theoretical or philosophical answer can be given. The empirical part of this book, chapters 5 and 6, gives a more concrete interpretation to this answer.

#### **7.1.1 *Making sense of the economic crisis: discursive sensemaking from a structure and an agency perspective***

How do municipalities with their partners make sense of the economic crisis? From the theoretical perspective I developed in this book, the answer is that this sensemaking has been a discursive process, in which the different actors have constructed a meaning for the economic crisis. The process of these municipalities and their partners was not a process of discovery, in which the participants bit by bit came closer to the final answer on what the economic crisis was. In line with many authors from the fields of social constructionism, institutionalism and discourse analysis, I stressed the contingent character of the economic crisis. Municipalities and their partners did not discover 'the' truth about the economic crisis, but they constructed 'their' truth about the economic crisis. This process of construction was a discursive process, in which the participants gave words to their experiences. These experiences, of which I gave some concrete examples in chapters 5 and 6, were gradually made sense of by making them part of the story about the economic crisis.

I also stressed the two perspectives that can be used to describe this discursive process: the structure perspective and the agency perspective. Applied to the subject of my research, this means that municipalities and their partners have made sense of the economic crisis on the one hand by translating broader existing discourses to their local practice. On the other hand, municipalities and their partners have also constructed their own discourse on the economic crisis through their interaction, their discursive practice. These two perspectives are not conflicting, but they coexist. Both deserve to be given a fair amount of attention, to get a thorough description of the discursive process of sensemaking of the economic crisis.

### *7.1.2 The relation between structure and agency*

The structure-agency issue played an important role in my research. I chose to keep both perspectives separated as long as possible in my empirical research, in order to do justice to both. I do not consider structure and agency as competing perspectives, but as perspectives that exist simultaneously. Structure can be seen as the framework within which people act, it determines their frame of reference. Agency shows the way in which reality is continuously recreated, primarily within the structural framework but with great variety of the concrete outcome and sometimes even stretching the structural framework a little bit. In chapters 5 and 6 I showed what this theoretical framework of two coexisting perspectives meant in the practice of two Dutch municipalities. I told the stories of the municipalities of Dryland and Highwater twice, from a structure perspective and from an agency perspective, to show how both theoretical perspectives were recognizable in the local practice of the two municipalities. Telling the stories separately prevented me from mixing the perspectives too soon. Still, in some situations both perspectives were quite obviously present, as actors discursively acted within a structural framework.

In the structure-agency issue the concept of power is also important. I stressed the role of power in the sensemaking of the economic crisis several times in this book. Power was, in line with Foucault's concept of discourse as power/knowledge, not exerted by specific individuals or groups of individuals. Power 'happened' through the discourses. This was particularly clear in both municipalities, where on the one hand the discursive processes in the Task Force in Highwater and in the Leading Group in Dryland lead to concrete actions and therefore had a great influence. On the other hand, the broader existing discourses influenced the Task Force and the Leading Group, by giving a framework within which discursive practice took place.



## **7.2 *Crisis? What crisis?! An empirical answer***

In chapters 5 and 6 of this book I gave an empirical answer to the question of how two Dutch municipalities with their partners made sense of the economic crisis. These two municipalities were Highwater and Dryland. At the end of both chapters, I already described my findings for the separate municipalities. In this final chapter I present my findings on an even broader level, by making a comparison between the two municipalities and showing where the municipalities were similar and where they show interesting differences.

### **7.2.1     *The need for a statistically based discourse as framework and starting point for the sensemaking process of the economic crisis***

The clearest analogy between the stories of Highwater and Dryland can be found in the way in which both municipalities discussed the state of the economy. Or, linked to the central question of this research, how they 'made sense of the economic crisis'. In both Highwater and Dryland there was an important role for statistically based discourses. The Task Force in Highwater had the Trend Monitor that contained several local and regional statistics about the economic situation. Sometimes also the national COEN was referred to. The Leading Group in Dryland had a similar monitor, which was the Economic and Social Thermometer. The specific statistics used in these monitors differed, which is an important observation because it also influenced the conclusions that were drawn from the monitors. This underlines the fact that statistics in themselves are no discourse, they have to be interpreted in a broader context by people who interact. Here the structure and agency perspective meet. The monitors in both municipalities were composed by people outside the Task Force and the Leading Group. This means that the members of both groups could not influence the choice of the specific statistics that were measured, as well as the interpretation that was given to the numbers in the monitors themselves. There was a broader discourse, expressed in the monitors, of fixed statistics that gave a certain impression of the state of the (local and regional) economy. This impression that came from the monitors was an example of a broader discourse that influenced the sensemaking process in the Task Force and the Leading Group, especially because the common feeling was that 'numbers don't lie'.

However, in both municipalities there also was an interesting process of how the groups dealt with these statistically based broader discourses. In the conversations about the Trend Monitor or the Economic and Social Thermometer, several factors related to the specific statistics were discussed. I described such a discussion in paragraph 5.2.1.1, about the Trend Monitor in Highwater. Issues that were discussed were for example the choice of the statistics that were included in the Trend Monitor, the way in which the statistics were measured and the interpretation that should be given to the numbers. Especially this last issue was something that came back regularly, in both municipalities. This is an example of the agency perspective, because the members of the groups started constructing their own reality by interpreting the numbers from the Trend Monitor or the

Economic and Social Thermometer. Hereby the personal backgrounds of the members of the Task Force and the Leading Group influenced the discourse on the current state of the economy. The groups were composed of representatives of different organizations and the stories of both Dryland and Highwater show how these different backgrounds influenced the way in which the economic situation was discussed. In paragraph 5.2.1.2 this becomes clear for the Task Force in Highwater. An interesting example is Diana, who described her view of the economic situation using terms from her background of social welfare. According to Diana, indicators like the number of people who are unemployed gave good insight in the current state of the economy. In paragraph 6.2.2 the same phenomenon is described for the Leading Group in Dryland. There Henry is an interesting example, as he described some sectors in which the entrepreneurs that he represented operate, in order to explain the current state of the economy.

One might say that the statistically based discourses around the Trend Monitor and the Economic and Social Thermometer created the structural framework within which the members of the Task Force and The Leading Group in interaction made sense of the economic situation. An interesting aspect of this is that the structural framework was in this case deliberately chosen by both groups. Both the Task Force and the Leading Group had chosen for a statistically based monitor as starting point for their discussions about the state of the economy. In situations where new meanings are needed, "shock situations" as Weick (1995) calls them, people apparently start looking for 'fixed' frameworks to hold on to. Statistics are a proper means for such a framework, because of their image of objectivity: 'numbers don't lie'. But also newspaper articles or broader, often less traceable, discourses (for example the crisis as a 'great danger') can function as such a framework. At the same time, my research shows how people use the structural framework they looked for as a means to start their own discursive practice. The people in Highwater and Dryland used the monitors to pick out the statistics that corresponded with their experiences or that were in line with the interests of the people or organizations that they represented. If needed they also publicly doubted the validity or the accurateness of certain statistics, for example if these numbers were not in line with their own experiences or interests. This kind of discussions took place several times in both the Task Force and the Leading Group. So the structural framework gives people on the one hand something to hold on to in their sensemaking process, but on the other hand it is interpreted, or re-constructed, in the discursive practice at a local level.

For this reconstruction in the discursive practice at a local level, another aspect of my research is interesting. The groups I studied, in both municipalities, were composed of people who represented the municipality and people who represented other organizations: the 'partners' of the municipality. This is an important aspect for the discursive practice in which people make sense of the economic crisis. As I said, personal backgrounds, interests and experiences played an important role in this. The fact that both the municipality of Highwater and the municipality of

Dryland chose to let their partners bring their backgrounds, interests and experiences into this process of discursive sensemaking, made it a much broader and more colorful process. In general, in (shock) situations like the economic crisis, it is important for municipalities to give room for other voices in the discursive practice. This prevents the municipality from constructing a meaning that is too much based on (representatives of) the municipality alone and that is not recognized by, or even shared with, their partners.

### 7.2.2     *The shift in the sensemaking process because of the discourse about public savings*

Another interesting parallel between the two municipalities was the discourse about public savings, that as a broader discourse influenced the sensemaking process. About a year after the start of the Task Force and the Leading Group, this discourse about public savings came up. I described the influence of this discourse on both municipalities in paragraphs 5.1.3 and 6.1.4.1. A distinction can be made between the discourse about the national public savings and the local public savings. But both had a major impact on the activities of the Task Force and the Leading Group. First, the impact was that, according to this broader discourse, there were no financial resources for new activities. At the start of the Task Force and the Leading Group, both municipalities had allocated a budget for activities to mitigate the effects of the economic crisis for their citizens and entrepreneurs. But after this budget was spent, there was no possibility to allocate a new budget. The main reason for this was that both municipalities had been confronted with the discourse of public savings, and were more concerned with their own financial situation than with that of their citizens and entrepreneurs. This was also reflected in a shift in the focus of the Task Force and the Leading Group. In both groups the activities were slowed down and the focus shifted from short term activities to help citizens and entrepreneurs to long term discussions about the economic situation of the municipality.

This was a clear example of a broader discourse that influenced the sensemaking process of both groups. This broader discourse really came from outside the Task Force and the Leading Group, but its impact was large. The response from both municipalities in their discursive practice was slightly different. In both municipalities, the discourse about public savings, and as an effect of it the shift from short-term activities to long-term ideas, decreased the enthusiasm of the partners. Because of this shift, there was less to gain directly from their participation in the Task Force or Leading Group.

The agenda of the Task Force in Highwater did not change fundamentally in response to the discourse about public savings. The Task Force kept looking for new activities, although they realized that the money to realize these activities was limited. The Task Force also kept the same main goal: mitigating the effects of the economic crisis. But gradually the enthusiasm about this

goal and about the Task Force in general seemed to decrease. People realized that the situation in which the Task Force once started, had changed quite radically.

In Dryland, the Leading Group responded more actively to the discourse of public savings. Here the effects of the discourse were the same: money for concrete activities was no longer available, so the initial goal of the Leading Group was not quite realistic anymore. But in response to this the Leading Group made a few important changes. First, the name of the Leading Group was changed. In the beginning its official name was Leading Group Economic Crisis. In the phase when the discourse of public savings came up, this name was changed into Economic Leading Group. With this name change the Leading Group wanted to stress that it was making a shift from a focus on short-term measures to mitigate the effects of the economic crisis to a focus on the longer-term economic situation of the municipality. This shift, among other things, took away for a large part the Leading Group's dependency of money. The longer-term activities on which the group was focused now, required no directly available budgets. This took away for a large part the pain of the public savings discourse. In line with the name change, the Leading Group also came up with new themes on which it would focus in the near future. These themes were the new economic vision for the municipality of Dryland and the theme of sustainability. Both themes gave the Leading Group a new perspective. Although some members of the Leading Group had to get used to this new perspective, it was an attempt to respond actively to the changing structural framework.

This example of the different responses to the public savings discourse contains an important lesson. Not only is it important to recognize the broader and existing discourses that influence your local situation. This is what both municipalities did: both recognized the public savings discourse and the effects that it would have. But it is also important to respond to this from your own local discursive practice. This is what the Leading Group in Dryland did better than the Task Force in Highwater. Within the structural framework, that had changed because of the public savings discourse, the Leading Group constructed a new discursive practice.

### 7.2.3      *Difference in the level of broader discourses that influenced the local discourse*

In my research, there was another aspect where the municipalities of Dryland and Highwater differed. This was the aspect of the level of broader, existing discourses that influenced the Task Force and the Leading Group. In general, it seems that the Task Force in Highwater was more influenced by local and regional discourses and the Leading Group in Dryland more by national and global discourses. In both cases this was sensemaking from a structural perspective, but the level of the broader and existing discourses differed.

Examples of local and regional discourses that influenced the Task Force in Highwater are the stories from other municipalities in the region (paragraph 5.1.2) and the influence of the local

elections (paragraphs 5.1.4.1 and 5.1.4.2) on the sensemaking process of the Task Force. These were broader and existing discourses, but on a rather small level.

In Dryland, the broader discourses that influenced the Leading Group were more on a national and global level. Examples are the references to newspaper articles, professors and sociologists (paragraphs 6.1.2.2 and 6.1.3.2), the 'credit crunch' discourse from Northern England and some taken-for-granted discourses that were not even explained (paragraph 6.1.1.1).

An interesting question is why the level of these broader discourses differs amongst the two municipalities. This seems to be linked to the size of the municipalities. Although I chose for my research two municipalities that were similar in many respects (paragraph 4.2.2), the size of the municipalities differed to some extent. Highwater was a municipality with 70.252 citizens (on 1 January 2010, according to Statistics Netherlands), while Drywater was a municipality with 98.523 citizens (also on 1 January 2010, according to Statistics Netherlands). It seems as if this difference in size affected the focus of the two municipalities. Highwater, smaller in size, seems to have been focused more on local and regional matters, whereas Dryland, bigger in size, seems to have been focused more on national and international matters. Another factor that may have influenced this difference in focus is the background of the people involved. The members of the Task Force in Highwater were mainly people who represented smaller organizations or organizations that operated on a local and regional level. An example of this is the association of local entrepreneurs, that represented mostly smaller entrepreneurs. The members of the Leading Group in Dryland were mainly representatives of larger organizations or organizations that operated nationally. This difference in background of the people involved may also explain the difference in focus of both municipalities.

Another step further are the discourses that are so obvious that they are not even mentioned. People are often not even aware of these discourses, while their impact is very large, partly because of their unconscious character. In the stories above about Dryland and Highwater these discourses are not explicitly discussed, because they are not mentioned in the meetings, documents or interviews. Nevertheless, an example of this can be given. In section 1.6 I described how the economic crisis can be seen as discourse. As an example I quoted Slavoj Žižek, who described the economic crisis from the perspective of Marx:

*"Marx's great achievement was to demonstrate how all phenomena which appear to everyday bourgeois consciousness as simple deviations, contingent deformations and degenerations of the 'normal' functioning of society (economic crisis, wars, and so on), and as such abolishable through amelioration of the system, are necessary products of the system itself - the points at which the 'truth', the immanent antagonistic character of the system, erupts. To 'identify with a system' means to recognize the 'excesses', in the disruptions of the 'normal' way of things, the key offering us access to its true functioning."*

Žižek 2008, 144

In this quote Žižek shows that the idea of the economic crisis as a break in the normal functioning of the economy is also part of a wider discourse, namely the capitalist discourse. From the Marxist discourse an economic crisis is a logical consequence of the true character of the (capitalist) system. In other words, an economic crisis is a result of the normal functioning of the economy, not a failure. By pointing to an alternative discourse, the Marxist one, Žižek shows that the capitalist conception of the economic crisis is also a discourse.

In both Highwater and Dryland the economic crisis is not discussed at this macro level, but in everything the influence of the capitalist discourse can be seen: one sees the crisis as a temporary slowdown in the economic system, which should be restored as soon as possible. This shows how the power of the capitalist discourse is also very prevalent in Highwater and Dryland. Precisely because people are unaware of this discourse and because it is not discussed, the power of structure is extra strong. This is an important finding, because it also applies more in general. The broader the level of the discourse, the more taken-for-granted it is for people, and therefore also the stronger the power that emerges through it.

*7.2.4 Attention for the perspectives, interests and backgrounds of different partners is important for the sensemaking process*

A final interesting finding from the comparison between the stories of Highwater and Dryland has to do with the interaction between the representatives from the municipality and the representatives of other organizations. In both stories this is an important theme. There is a difference in the perceptions and expectations from the Task Force or Leading Group between the municipality and other organizations. The representatives from the municipality see the Task Force or Leading Group as a common initiative, meant to serve the public interest. The representatives of the other organizations on the other hand consider the Task Force or Leading Group more as an initiative from the municipality, in which they participate for their own interest or the interest of the people they represent. In Highwater this difference in perceptions and expectations leads to a certain tension (paragraph 5.2.4). This has also to do with the fact that the majority of the members of the Taskforce in Highwater are representatives of the municipality, including the chairman and the secretary. In Highwater there are also 'internal meetings', without the representatives of other organizations, next to the 'external meetings' with all members. This procedure makes that there is a growing tension between the representatives of the municipality, who think the other members are using the Task Force for their own benefit, and the representatives of the other organizations, who think the municipality is following its own agenda. In Dryland a similar effect can be seen, but in a slightly different way. Here the research shows that the members have sometimes different expectations from the Leading Group (the municipality sees it as a common initiative, while the other members see it as an initiative of the municipality in which they participate), but the municipality takes more effort to change this. Examples of these

efforts are that there are not too many representatives from the municipality in the Leading Group and that the locations of the meetings are changed. This difference in awareness seems to influence the effect. In Dryland people are more optimistic about the cooperation than in Highwater.

This is an important finding for municipalities that, also related to other themes than the economic crisis, want to cooperate with other organizations. It is important that there is a shared discursive practice. In Highwater this was not optimal, partly because the conversations were held on different levels. Because of the distinction between 'internal' and 'external' meetings, there were also two different discursive practices. In Dryland, this distinction in meetings did not exist. Moreover, more attention was paid to the different organizations that participated in the Leading Group and the fact that it was important to keep a good balance in the composition of the group. The effects of these different approaches could be seen in Highwater and Dryland. It means that for municipalities that want to cooperate with other organizations, it is important to make sure that there is a shared discursive practice, with a good balance in the different interests and backgrounds of the people and organizations involved.

### ***7.3 Contribution to the practice discourse on a micro level***

In this concluding chapter I want to consider the relevance of this research. Relevance is, in my perception of academic research, an important issue. Academic research is not about finding 'the' truth, but about contributing to different discourses, both academic and practice discourses. In paragraph 2.4.3 I described different audiences to which I address this description of my research. In line with the audiences I described there, I will now say something about the contribution of my research to the discourses of these different audiences. In this paragraph, I start with the relevance of this research for the practice discourse on a micro level, in the two municipalities that I studied.

#### ***7.3.1 The tales of two cities in juxtaposition***

In my research, I looked at two municipalities and I described the stories of both municipalities separately. These stories contribute to the discourses in both municipalities, in several ways.

First, when the people in Dryland and Highwater read the stories, they can look at the similarities and differences between their municipality and the other one. They can see where they made similar choices or were faced with similar challenges, but they can also see where their choices and challenges differed.

Second, the two stories can contribute to the discourses in both municipalities, because of my theoretical perspective. I described the discourses in both municipalities from a specific theoretical perspective, focusing on the process of sensemaking and on the discursive character of the Task

Force and the Leading Group. For the people in Dryland and Highwater this will shed a different light on their local practice. The way I describe this practice will be from a different perspective than they had, and using a different vocabulary. This may contribute to their discourses, by influencing the way they look at these past events.

Third, the juxtaposition of the stories from a structure perspective and from an agency perspective will also shed a different light on the practices in Highwater and Dryland. People will probably not have been aware of these different perspectives: the focus on broader existing discourses that form a framework for their local actions on the one hand, and the focus on the discursive practice where people in interaction construct new meanings on the other hand. My stories about the municipalities in which I describe these two perspectives separately may contribute to the discourses in both municipalities. People might start looking differently to the past events, with more awareness of the difference between the structure and agency perspective.

### 7.3.2      *Influence during the process*

The contribution of my research to the discourses in Highwater and Dryland did not only start after my analysis. Already during the research process my presence in both municipalities influenced the discourses. I explained before how I consider myself not as a researcher who looks at his research objects from an outsider point of view. In my research, I participated in the Task Force and the Leading Group. I did try to take a background position, but nonetheless I participated and therefore influenced the process.

Just the fact that I participated in The Task Force and the Leading Group already meant that I contributed to the discourses in the Task Force and the Leading Group, but I did this from a specific academic discourse. The way I looked at the processes of the Task Force and the Leading Group, but also the kind of questions I asked in the interviews with the members of both groups, went back to the academic discourse of discourse analysis and the structure-agency issue. So my contribution to the discourses in the Task Force and the Leading group was mainly by focusing on the discursive processes of sensemaking, i.e. the way in which both groups constructed the meaning of the economic crisis and the consequences of it for the local economy, local entrepreneurs and citizens.

During my research, I tried to stay at the background and to focus on my role as little as possible. Because of this my contribution to the discourses in Dryland and Highwater was also often not explicit. My role was not discussed and I tried not to focus on it as well. Still there was one clear example during one of the interviews I had with a member of the Leading Group in Dryland. This was the interview with Peter. During the interview he made my role, and specifically my contribution to the discourse, explicit. He said that my presence in the Leading Group, and especially the type of questions I asked him during the interview, made him reconsider the process of the Leading Group and his expectations of it. This shows concretely something that probably



happened a lot more often: my presence that contributed to the discourses in Dryland and Highwater.

### 7.3.3     *Influence afterwards*

There is one other example of the relevance of my research for the practice discourse on a micro level. However, it is hard to say something about this in this book. It has to do with the fact that I have called this final chapter a concluding chapter, but not a conclusion. My research may also contribute to the discourses in Dryland and Highwater, after I finished this book. My description of the research in this book may influence the Task Force and the Leading Group when their members read it. However, it is hard to say to what extent and in what way this will happen.

## **7.4     *Contribution to the practice discourse on a macro level***

My research does not only contribute to the practice discourse on a micro level in the two municipalities that I have studied. It will also contribute to the practice discourse on a macro level. The audience I address here is not the people in Dryland and Highwater, but for example politicians or civil servants from other municipalities, or other people like consultants who work for municipalities. To this audience my research is relevant to the extent that it has something to say about municipalities in general, related to the economic crisis or other similar events.

### 7.4.1     *The economic crisis as a discourse*

First, my research is relevant to the practice discourse on a macro level by what it has to say about the economic crisis. In my research, I consider the economic crisis as a discursively constructed reality and not as an objective factual reality. I have shown that the meaning of the economic crisis was not fixed, but that has evolved in time. I also showed how the meaning of the economic crisis evolved differently in different contexts. In Dryland, the meaning of the economic crisis evolved differently than in Highwater. This is the discursive practice that takes place at a local level. However, I also showed that there were broader and existing discourses about the economic crisis that influenced the discursive process in both municipalities. These broader and existing discourses formed as it were the framework in which the meaning of the economic crisis was (re)constructed.

The way I looked at the economic crisis in my research can contribute to the practice discourse on a macro level by handing a new vocabulary for discussing the economic crisis. It may help to shift the discourse about the economic crisis as a factual event that happens 'to' municipalities to a discourse about the economic crisis that happens 'in' municipalities and is constructed by the participants in the discourse, within the framework of broader and existing discourses.

#### 7.4.2      *The role of discourse in day to day business*

What I said above about my contribution to the practice discourse on a macro level about the economic crisis also applies in a broader sense. My research may contribute to the practice discourse by focusing on the discursive character of many processes in day to day business. In my research, I have stressed the importance of language, social construction and power in everyday processes. This applies broader than only to the discourse about the economic crisis. My research may contribute to the practice discourse by focusing on the social character of many processes. Reality is not fixed, but (re)constructed every day in the social interaction between people. Language plays a crucial role in this, because through language words are given to new phenomena or phenomena that have to be redefined.

The concept of power is also very important in this. Power is in practice often considered as something that is 'owned' and 'executed' by individuals. I have shown how power is exerted through discourse. Discourse can be very powerful, because through discourse reality is (re)defined and even (re)constructed. My research may help people to be aware of this.

#### 7.4.3      *Awareness of one's own role and influence in the discourse*

In line with this, my research may also make people who work in municipalities aware of their own role. The audience that I address in this perspective are people who participate in discourses that evolve everyday within municipalities. By showing people how these discursive processes evolve, they can be more aware of their own role in the process. People may see how they are influenced by broader existing discourses on the one hand, and maybe also recognize these broader discourses as such. Through this they may realize that their position in the discourse, or their meaning about something, may be influenced for a large part by broader discourses that form a framework in which they operate. This framework can even be so strong that they will hardly recognize it as such. My research has shown that these discursive frameworks can be experienced as taken-for-granted. Still, my research may help people in practice to be more aware of the discursive character of these taken-for-granted frameworks.

On the other hand, they may see how they can act in the discursive processes in which they participate. They may see how they can influence the discursive practice, and how it is not so much their formal position that is decisive, as well as the way in which they operate within the process of social interaction. By realizing this, people will not obtain power themselves, but they will be better able to recognize the power that is exerted through the discourse and adjust their actions to it.

### **7.5      *Contribution to the academic discourse***

Next to the practice discourse on a micro and a macro level, my research also contributes to an academic discourse. I described this academic discourse in chapters 1-4 of this book. Through my

research, I have participated in this academic discourse and made my own contribution to it. My research contributes to this discourse in several ways.

#### 7.5.1      *Role and influence of the researcher*

In my research, I stressed the role and influence of myself as a researcher. I chose to describe my role in this book quite thoroughly and be as transparent and reflexive as possible about how I performed my research. Especially in paragraph 2.5 I explained why I did this. In chapters 5 and 6 I described how I applied it in my empirical research in Dryland and Highwater. For example, I gave some examples of how my presence in the Task Force and the Leading Group influenced the processes in these groups. Although this influence was not part of some strategy that I used, I considered it important to mention it because of my strategy of reflexivity.

In my view this emphasis on the role and influence of the researcher is important in describing the kind of research I performed. It may not be common to pay this much attention to it, but I think it is important for a researcher to do so, in order to be clear about one's position, about the choices one has made during the research process and about the (sometimes unintended) consequences of one's actions. The way in which I dealt with this subject may contribute to the academic discourse on how to perform research like this. It can be an example for other scholars who want to perform similar research, or it can be input for the discussion about the preferred methodology for this kind of research.

#### 7.5.2      *Structure-agency: two stories in juxtaposition*

The relevance of my research for an academic audience lies also in my use of the structure-agency issue. This issue played a central role in my research and I dealt with it in a specific manner. Especially my choice to tell two stories about the same municipality, one from a structure perspective and one from an agency perspective, can contribute to the discourse about how to study the structure-agency issue. In paragraph 3.2 I described the structure-agency issue and the many different positions scholars take in the relation between the two perspectives. I chose to see the perspectives not as competing, but as two perspectives that coexist. One should pay attention to both the structure perspective and the agency perspective in order to understand what is happening. Difficult as it may be, one should try not to give one perspective preference over the other. In paragraph 4.1 I then explained how I used analytic bracketing to apply this in concrete empirical research. I chose to tell the story of each municipality twice: once from a structure perspective and once from an agency perspective. By doing this I gave my readers the opportunity to see my analysis from both perspectives separately. Only in the latest stage of my analysis I started by linking the two perspectives.

My choice of dealing with the structure-agency perspective this way is quite original. It needs to be applied more often, in several types of research, to see how it works out. However, my research

can contribute to the academic discourse on how to perform research about the structure-agency issue. It can give a new example of how to deal with the issue, both theoretically and empirically.

## ***7.6 Contribution to my personal development as researcher and human being***

In paragraph 2.4.3 I finally mentioned myself as an audience of my research. I described how this research also would contribute to my personal development as researcher and human being, or in Foucault's words: to the self-creation of me as a subject. In paragraph 4.4.3 I described how the researcher is himself constituted during his research: the construction of the subject. The research has therefore also relevance for myself, as a researcher but also broader as a human being. I look at this self-creation, in line with my research, from a structure perspective and from an agency perspective.

### ***7.6.1 Structure – contingency and discursivity***

This research has constructed myself as a researcher, by making me more and more aware of the contingency of my research. Especially the broader and existing academic discourses in which I participated for this research, made me more aware of the contingency of what I was doing. For my research, I read a lot about social construction, discourse analysis and all that I described in chapters 1-4 of this book, and this became the framework within which I acted as a researcher. This contingency also means that my research, and the description of it that I give in this book, applies only within the boundaries of the discursive framework in which I operate. Outside of this framework, within different academic discourses, it will be meaningless or non-sense. The relevance of my research therefore also only applies to the academic discourse in which I participate. Within that framework, it can contribute to the discourse and be valuable.

For me as a person this also means that it is not only my research that stands within a specific discursive framework, but that it also puts myself within that framework. I have not just chosen a discursive framework, which I can replace for a different one in my next research. The discursive framework in which I operate has formed me, both as a researcher and as a human being. I look at the world around me through the perspective of contingency and discursivity. That is what has become my reality. Therefore, this research and the discursive framework that I described in this book has constructed me and influenced my view on the world. It also helped me to be more aware of these structural elements, the broader and existing discourses that influence me. And, on the other hand, it has made me more aware of the discursive frameworks that influence others and the difference there can be with mine.

### 7.6.2     *Agency – own role and influence*

From an agency perspective, this research has made me more aware of my own role and the influence that my actions can have. Although I act within a discursive framework, I also take part in different discourses and contribute to them through my actions. In the municipalities that I studied, I saw how the actions of certain individuals influenced the discursive process of the Task Force and the Leading Group. I also saw how my presence in these groups, and the things I said or did, influenced the process within the groups. This made me more aware of the role I could play in the discourses in which I participate and in influence of my actions. This not only applies to my actions as a researcher, but also my actions in other discourses in which I participate in day-to-day life.

## **7.7    *Suggestions for future research***

At the end of this concluding chapter I want to look ahead. In this research I have chosen for a specific focus. During the research I have seen several opportunities for further research, things that were outside the scope of this research but interesting for future research. In this paragraph, I mention some of these opportunities.

In this research I selected two municipalities, Dryland and Highwater, of similar size and facing a similar challenge. In this concluding chapter I already suggested that the relatively small difference in size between the two municipalities might have influenced the focus of the Task Force and the Leading Group. I said that the Task Force in Highwater was more influenced by local and regional discourses in their discussions about the state of the economy, whereas the Leading Group in Dryland (the municipality of a larger size) was influenced more by national and international discourses. It would be interesting for future research to see what the influence of the size of the municipality is, regarding to the type of broader existing discourses that influence the local discourse.

In line with this, it would also be interesting for future research to look at a larger group of organizations. In this research, I looked at only two municipalities. I had good reasons for this, because it made it possible to look in depth to the processes that were going on in these municipalities. However, for further research it would be interesting to look at more different organizations. This might make it harder to look at these organizations at the same level of detail, but the larger group of organizations would make it better possible to look at common threads.

Another issue to be dealt with in future research is something I already mentioned in paragraph 4.3.3. Initially I had planned to look at the development of the discourses in Dryland and Highwater, amongst other things by interviewing the members of the Task Force and the Leading

Group twice. This would make it possible to see how the discourses evolved in time. For reason mentioned in paragraph 4.3.3 I chose differently, but for future research it would be interesting to study the development of discourses in time. This could be done by interviewing research objects several times, but there can also be thought of other ways to do this.

In my research I chose the economic crisis as my focus. This was an international crisis, evolving over a period of several years. For future research, it would be interesting to also look at other types of crises. It could for example be interesting to look at a crisis with a more local character, and see how the relation between structure and agency is in such a crisis. After all, because of the international character of this economic crisis, there was a clear influence by the broader existing discourses about the economic crisis. In a smaller crisis, there will also be an influence of broader existing discourses, but these will be less explicitly linked to the local crisis that is studied. It would be interesting to see what this looks like.

Finally, in general it would be interesting to do more research using my methodology of 'two tales of a city'. For this research I chose to tell two separate stories of each municipality, one from a structure perspective and one from an agency perspective. This is quite an original approach and it would be interesting to apply it in other research as well.

## **7.8 The continuing story...**

I chose to call this final chapter a concluding chapter, but not a conclusion. The reason for this lies in the fact that this book is a contingent text. I explained earlier that it is not a text that stands on its own. This book originated from several discourses that came together in my research on two Dutch municipalities and their response to the economic crisis. These discourses resonate in the text of this book. But this book will also become part of several discourses after the writing process has finished. There are several audiences to which this text is addressed. These audiences may or may not read it, and they may or may not integrate parts of it in their discourses. The extent to which this happens, determines the way in which this text 'lives on'. Burawoy gives a good description of this continuing character of science:

*"Theories do not spring tabula rasa from the data but are carried forward through intellectual debate and division. They then reenter the wider world of participants, there to be adopted, refuted, and extended in intended and unintended ways, circulating back into science. Science offers no final truth, but exists in a state of continual revision."*

Burawoy 1998, 16

Therefore I consider this chapter as a concluding chapter, because it is the final part of this text in which I have described my research. But it is not a conclusion, because the effects of this research will only be visible at a later stage. So now that I stop writing, let the story continue...





## Literature

**Aardema, Harrie (2002)**, *Doorwerking van BBI; Evaluatie van een veranderingsbeweging bij de Nederlandse gemeenten*, Bestuur & Management Consultants

**Aardema, Harrie (2005)**, *Stille waarden; een reflectie op overnormering in publiek management*, Open Universiteit Nederland en Bestuur & Management Consultants

**Abma, Tineke & Roel in 't Veld (2001)**, "Beleid en wetenschap" en "Vijf beleidswetenschappelijke perspectieven", in: Tineke Abma & Roel in 't Veld (ed.), *Handboek beleidswetenschap*, Boom

**Åkerström, Malin (2006)**, "Doing ambivalence: embracing policy innovation – at arm's length", *Social Problems*, 53:1, 57-74

**Alvesson, Mats & Dan Karreman (2000)**, "Varieties of discourse: On the study of organizations through discourse analysis", *Human Relations*, 53 (9), 1125-1149

**Alvesson, Mats & Kaj Sköldberg (2000)**, *Reflexive methodology; new vistas for qualitative research*, Sage Publications

**Barley, Stephan R. & Pamela S. Tolbert (1997)**, "Institutionalization and structuration: studying the links between action and institution", *Organization Studies*, 18:1, 93-117

**Berger, Peter L. & Thomas Luckmann (1966)**, *The social construction of reality; a treatise in the sociology of knowledge*, Penguin Books

**Bogt, Henk J. ter & G. Jan van Helden (2000)**, "Accounting change in Dutch government: Exploring the gap between expectations and realizations", *Management Accounting Research*, 11, 263-279

**Boje, David M. (1991)**, "The Storytelling Organization: A Study of Story Performance in an Office-Supply Firm", in: *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 36, 106-126

**Boland Jr., Richard J., Arun K. Sharma & Paulo Sérgio Afonso (2008)**, "Designing management control in hybrid organizations: the role of path creation and morphogenesis", doi:10.1016/j.aos.2008.06.006

**Boonstra, Jaap J. (ed.) (2004)**, *Dynamics of organizational change and learning*, John Wiley & Sons

**Bos, Jaap (2007)**, *Discoursanalyse; communicatie op de werkvloer*, Coutinho

**Brunsson, Nils (1990)**, "Deciding for responsibility and legitimation: alternative interpretations of organizational decision-making", *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 15:1/2, 47-59

**Brunsson, Nils (1993)**, "Ideas and actions: justification and hypocrisy as alternatives to control", *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 18:6, 489-506

**Burawoy, Michael (1998)**, "The extended case method", *Sociological Theory*, 16:1

**Burns, J., M. Ezzamel & R. Scapens (2003)**, *The Challenge of Management Accounting Change; Behavioral and Cultural Aspects of Change Management*, Elsevier

**Burns, John & Robert W. Scapens (2000)**, "Conceptualizing management accounting change: an institutional framework", *Management Accounting Research*, 11, 3-25

**Crawley, Sara L. & K.L. Broad (2004)**, "Be your (real lesbian) self; mobilizing sexual formula stories through personal (and political) storytelling", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 33:1, 39-71

**Cunliffe, Ann L. (2001)**, "Managers as practical authors: reconstructing our understanding of management practice", *Journal of Management Studies*, 38:3, 351-371

**De Loo, Ivo (2008)**, *Organizational development through management control: the case of action learning*, Shaker Publishing

**De Loo, Ivo, Peter Nederlof & Bernard Verstegen (2006)**, "Detecting behavioural patterns of Dutch controller graduates through interpretive interactionism principles", *Qualitative Research in Accounting & Management*, 3:1, 46-66

**De Saussure, Louis (2007)**, "Pragmatic issues in discourse analysis", *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis Across Disciplines*, 1:1, 179-195

**DiMaggio, Paul J. & Walter W. Powell (1983)**, "The iron cage revisited: institutional isomorphism and collective rationalism in organizational fields", *American Sociological Review*, 48, 147-160

**Doorman, Maarten & Heleen Pott (ed.) (2005)**, *Filosofen van deze tijd*, Bert Bakker

**Ezzamel, M., Keith Robson, Pam Stapleton & Christine McLean (2007)**, "Discourse and institutional change: 'Giving accounts' and accountability", *Management Accounting Research*, 18, 150-171

**Ezzamel, Mahmoud, Hugh Wilmott & Frank Worthington (2001)**, "Power, control and resistance in the factory that time forgot", *Journal of Management Studies*, 38:8

**Ezzamel, Mahmoud, Hugh Wilmott & Frank Worthington (2008)**, "Manufacturing shareholder value: The role of accounting in organizational transformation", *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 33, 107-140

**Ezzamel, Mahmoud, Jason Zezhong Xiao & Aixiang Pan**, "Political ideology and accounting regulation in China", *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 32, 669-700

**Fairclough, Norman (1992)**, *Discourse and social change*, Polity Press

**Falbe, Cecilia M. & Gary Yukl (1992)**, "Consequences for managers of using single influence tactics and combinations of tactics", *Academy of Management Journal*, 35:3, 638-652

**Feyerabend, Paul (2008)**, *Tegen de methode*, Lemniscaat

**Fiss, Peer C. & Paul M. Hirsch (2005)**, "The discourse of globalization: framing and sensemaking of an emerging concept", *American Sociological Review*, 70, 29-52

**Foucault, Michel (1989)**, *Discipline, toezicht en straf*, Historische Uitgeverij

**Foucault, Michel (1994)**, *The birth of the clinic: an archaeology of medical perception*, Vintage Books

**Foucault, Michel (2001)**, *Madness and civilization*, Taylor & Francis Ltd.

**Foucault, Michel (2002)**, *The order of things*, Routledge

**Foucault, Michel (2004)**, *Breekbare vrijheid; teksten & interviews*, Boom Parrèsia

**Giddens, Anthony (1984)**, *The constitution of society. Outline of the theory of structuration*, Polity Press

**Gioia, Dennis A. & Peter P. Poole (1984)**, "Scripts in organizational behavior", *Academy of Management Review*, 9:3, 449-459

**Guba, Egon G. & Yvonna S. Lincoln (2005)**, "Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences" in: Denzin, Norman K. & Yvonna S. Lincoln (ed.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Sage Publications

**Hajer, Maarten (2002)**, "Discourse analysis and the study of policy making", in: Jim Newell & Martin Rhodes (eds.), *European Political Science*, European Consortium for Political Research

**Hajer, Maarten (2006)**, "Doing discourse analysis: coalitions, practices, meaning", in: Margo van den Brink & Tamara Metze (eds.), *Words matter in policy and planning; Discourse theory and method in the social sciences*, Netherlands Graduate School of Urban and Regional Research

**Hajer, Maarten & Wytske Versteeg (2009)**, "Political Rhetoric in the Netherlands: Reframing Crises in the Media", in: Bertelsmann Stiftung and Migration Policy Institute (eds. 2009), *Migration, Public Opinion and Politics*, Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, Germany

**Hendry, John (2000)**, "Strategic decision making, discourse, and strategy as social practice", *Journal of Management Studies*, 37:7, 955-977

**Holman, David & Richard Thorpe (ed.) (2003)**, *Management and Language; the manager as practical author*, Sage Publications

**Holstein, James A. & Jaber F. Gubrium (2005)**, "Interpretive practice and social action", in: Denzin, Norman K. & Yvonna S. Lincoln (ed.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Sage Publications

**Huijjer, Marli (2011)**, "Michel Foucault over het ware, filosofische leven", *Filosofie Magazine*, jaargang 20, No. 8, 46-52

**Hulst, Merlijn van (2008)**, *Town hall tales: culture as storytelling in local government*, Eburon Publishers

**Jacobs, Dirk (1993)**, "Het structurisme als synthese van handelings- en systeemtheorie?", *Tijdschrift voor Sociologie*, jaargang 14, 335-360

**Kaats, Edwin & Wilfrid Opheij (2008)**, *Bestuurders zijn van betekenis; allianties en netwerken vanuit bestuurlijk perspectief*, Reed Business

**Kelemen, Michaela & Nick Rumens (2008)**, *An introduction to critical management research*, Sage Publications

**Knights, David (1997)**, "Organization theory in the age of deconstruction: dualism, gender and postmodernism revisited", *Organization Studies*, 18:1, 1-19

**Knights, David & Glenn Morgan (1991)**, "Corporate strategy, organizations and subjectivity: a critique", *Organization Studies*, 12:2, 251-273

**Kilduff, Martin & Ajay Mehra (1997)**, "Postmodernism and organizational research", *Academy of Management Review*, 22:2, 453-481

**Lane, Philip R. (2012)**, "The European Sovereign Debt Crisis", *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 26:3, 49-68

**Maitlis, Sally (2005)**, "The social processes of organizational sensemaking", *Academy of Management Journal*, 48:1, 21-49

**Maitlis, Sally & Thomas B. Lawrence (2007)**, "Triggers and enablers of sensegiving in organizations", *Academy of Management Journal*, 50:1, 57-84

**Marchi, Anna & Charlotte Taylor (2009)**, "If on a winter's night two researchers... A challenge to assumptions of soundness of interpretation", *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines*, 3:1, 1-20

**McGuire, Jean B. (1992)**, "A qualitative analysis of dialectical processes in educational organizations", *Human Relations*, 45:4, 387-410

**Merchant, Kenneth A. & Wim A. van der Stede (2007)**, *Management control systems; Performance measurement, evaluation and incentives*, Harlow

**Meyer, John W. & Brian Rowan (1991)**, "Institutional organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony", in: Walter W. Powell & Paul J. DiMaggio, *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis*, The University of Chicago Press, p. 41-62

**Mishkin, Frederic S. (2011)**, "Over the Cliff: From the Subprime to the Global Financial Crisis", *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 25:1, 49–70

**Modell, Sven, Kerry Jacobs & Fredrika Wiesel (2007)**, "A process (re)turn? Path dependencies, institutions and performance management in Swedish central government", *Management Accounting Research*, 18, 453-475

**Morgan, Gareth (1997)**, *Images of organization*, Sage Publications

**Noordegraaf, Mirko (2000)**, *Attention! Work and behavior of public managers amidst ambiguity*, Eburon Publishers

**Ouchi, William G. (1980)**, "Markets, bureaucracies, and clans", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 25:1, 129-141

**Persson, Tove & David Wästerfors (2009)**, "Such trivial matters: how staff account for restrictions of residents' influence in nursing homes", *Journal of Aging Studies*, 23, 1-11

**Phillips, Nelson, Thomas B. Lawrence & Cynthia Hardy (2004)**, "Discourse and institutions", *Academy of Management Review*, 29:4, 635-652

**Phillips, Peter C. B. & Jun Yu (2011)**, "Dating the timeline of financial bubbles during the subprime crisis", *Quantitative Economics*, 2, 455–491

**Powell, Walter W. & Paul J. DiMaggio (ed.) (1991)**, *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis*, The University of Chicago Press

**Powers, Penny (2007)**, "The philosophical foundations of Foucaultian discourse analysis", *Critical Approaches of Discourse Analysis across Disciplines*, 1:2, 18-34

- Quinn, John J. (1996)**, "The role of 'good conversation' in strategic control", *Journal of Management Studies*, 33:3, 381-394
- Quinn, Robert E. (2004)**, *De brug bouwen terwijl je erover loopt*, Academic Service
- Rorty, Richard (2008a)**, *Contingentie, ironie en solidariteit*, Uitgeverij Ten Have
- Rorty, Richard (2008b)**, *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*, University Presses of California, Columbia and Princeton
- Sandberg, Jörgen (2005)**, "How do we justify knowledge produced within interpretive approaches?", *Organizational Research Methods*, 8:1, 41-68
- Scapens, Robert W. (1990)**, "Researching management accounting practice: the role of case study methods", *British Accounting Review*, 22, 259-281
- Seo, Myeong-Gu & W.E. Douglas Creed (2002)**, "Institutional contradictions, praxis, and institutional change: a dialectical perspective", *Academy of Management Review*, 27:2, 222-247
- Simons, Robert (1995)**, *Levers of Control; How managers use innovative control systems to drive strategic renewal*, Harvard Business School Press
- Smelser, Neil J. & Richard Swedberg (ed.) (2005)**, *The handbook of economic sociology*, Princeton University Press and Russell Sage foundation
- Steen, Martijn Pieter van der (2005)**, *Human agency in management accounting change; a cognitive approach to institutional theory*, Labyrinth Publications
- Temin, Peter (2010)**, "The Great Recession & the Great Depression", *Daedalus*, 139:4, 115-124
- Thomas, James B., Shawn M. Clark & Dennis A. Gioia (1993)**, "Strategic sensemaking and organizational performance: linkages among scanning, interpretation, action, and outcomes", *Academy of Management Journal*, 36:2, 239-270
- Torring, Jacob (1999)**, *New theories of discourse; Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek*, Blackwell Publishers
- Twist, Mark van (1994)**, *Verbale vernieuwing; aantekeningen over de kunst van bestuurskunde*, VUGA Uitgeverij BV

**Vandenberghe, Frédéric (1993)**, "Realisme en structurisme", *Tijdschrift voor Sociologie*, 14:3, 313-334

**Vighi, Fabio & Heiko Feldner (2007)**, "Ideology critique or discourse analysis? Zizek against Foucault", *European Journal of Political Theory*, 6:2, 141-159

**Watson, Tony J. (1995)**, "Rhetoric, Discourse and Argument in Organizational Sense Making: A Reflexive Tale", *Organizational Studies*, 16:5, 805-821

**Weick, Karl E. (1995)**, *Sensemaking in organizations*, Sage Publications

**Weick, Karl E., Kathleen M. Sutcliffe & David Obstfeld (2005)**, "Organizing and the process of sensemaking", *Organization Science*, 16:4, 409-421

**Wiley, Norbert (1988)**, "The micro-macro problem in social theory", *Sociological Theory*, 6, 254-261

**Yin, Robert K. (2009)**, *Case study research: design and methods*, Sage Publications

**Žižek, Slavoj (2008)**, *The sublime object of ideology*, Verso



## Summary

In 2008 a worldwide economic crisis started that affected many countries, organizations and individuals all over the world. Municipalities in the Netherlands were also affected by this economic crisis. They had to respond to the events that happened; events that were part of this broader phenomenon that was called 'the economic crisis'.

The central question of this research is: "How do municipalities with their partners make sense of the economic crisis?". In this research I consider the economic crisis as a constructed reality. The economic crisis is not part of an objective truth 'out there', but part of a reality that is constructed in the interaction between people. In this interaction, people try to make sense of the things that happen to them. These events and experiences have no meaning in themselves: people construct meaning, they make sense of the events and experiences by constructing a coherent whole in which the events and experiences are meaningful.

In this sensemaking process the concept of 'discourse' plays an important role. A discourse is a system of statements which constructs an object. The notion of discourse shows the important role of language in the sensemaking process. People use language to give meaning to reality. The way in which people talk about events and experiences determines their meaning. These separate events are connected to each other in a single coherent discourse. One can therefore say that reality is discursively constructed.

Because of this important role of discourse in the sensemaking process, power is exerted through discourse. Discourses are power mechanisms in our social reality. Between people power is exerted by discourses. Power, in this sense, is not something that is obtained, possessed or shared by anyone. It also does not work only top-down and it is not intentional. Power 'happens' through discourse.

This research is about discourses on the economic crisis, specifically in two Dutch municipalities. The economic crisis is also a constructed reality, because it gets meaning through discursive processes. Because discourses on the economic crisis construct the social reality of people, and because this also leads to concrete actions, one can say that power is exerted through these discourses on the economic crisis. The two municipalities in this research make sense of the economic crisis together with some of their partners: important organizations within the local or regional community, like entrepreneurs, healthcare organizations, local banks, educational institutions and housing cooperatives. In a Task Force or Leading Group they discuss the meaning of the economic crisis for their municipality and actions they can take to mitigate the consequences of the economic crisis. The discursive process that takes place in these groups is the focus of this research.

As reality is socially constructed through discursive processes, meaning that is constructed is contingent. Meaning is embedded in specific circumstances and linked to specific discursive processes. The same applies to (academic) research into these discursive processes. Knowledge that is obtained through this research is also contingent, embedded in the specific context of the research. The specific circumstances in which this research took place, the people involved in the research, both researcher and research objects, all influenced the outcome of the research.

The contingent character of this research is also addressed in the description of the research in this book. The positivistic criteria of validity and reliability do not apply to this research, but it does meet the criteria of consistency, transparency and reflexivity. The concept of consistency means that the research is performed based on a coherent idea that is consistently applied; there are no internal contradictions in the research. The concept of transparency means that the researcher is transparent about the steps he has taken and the choices he has made. The concept of reflexivity means that the researcher reflects on his own role and the influence he has had on the research. The attitude of a researcher who wants to meet the criteria of consistency, transparency and reflexivity should be an attitude of phenomenological epoché. This means that the researcher delays or brackets his judgment, in order to give as much space as possible to the lived experience that is studied to speak for itself.

This research is about discourses on the economic crisis. The concepts of discourse and discourse analysis are used in various ways. In this research I follow the position of Michel Foucault. His position is, amongst others, contrasted to Richard Rorty and Slavoj Žižek. It is characterized by a critical approach, where the power that emanates from discourse is stressed. In this research I looked at the power that emanated from the discourses on the economic crisis in the two municipalities that I studied.

There are two perspectives to look at discourses. On the one hand there are broader discourses that evolve on a macro level and that structure local discursive processes. These 'discourses-in-practice' form a framework for the sensemaking processes that take place on a local level. In this research this is called the structure perspective. On the other hand there are local discursive processes where individuals in interaction (re)construct reality. These 'discursive practices' influence from a local level the broader and existing discourses. In this research this is called the agency perspective. The relation between the structure and agency perspective is discussed in the so-called structure-agency issue. Different positions in this structure-agency issue are discussed in this research. I choose for a position where both perspectives are considered as complementary instead of competing. I look for discourses on the economic crisis from both perspectives: broader and existing discourses that influence the local processes in the municipalities that are studied and local discursive practices where meaning is constructed in the interaction between individual members of the groups that are studied.

In this research the method of analytic bracketing is used to deal with the structure-agency issue. Analytic bracketing means that the researcher constantly changes perspective, in this case from the structure to the agency perspective and vice versa. The perspectives are not mixed, but addressed separately. In this research I chose to apply the method of analytic bracketing by describing two stories for each of the municipalities that are studied: one story from a structure perspective and one story from an agency perspective. Only in the last part of the analysis both stories are connected. This juxtaposition of the structure and agency perspective shows the difference between both, and also the different ways in which power emanates in both perspectives.

For this research two Dutch municipalities were selected, called by the fictitious names of Highwater and Dryland. These were both municipalities that formed a Task Force (in Highwater) or Leading Group (in Dryland) in order to mitigate the consequences of the economic crisis. Both groups consisted of representatives from the municipality and other organizations. For this research these groups were followed for a one-year period. The Task Force in Highwater was studied from April 2010 till July 2011 and the Leading Group in Dryland was studied from November 2010 till November 2011. For this research I studied documents related to both groups. These were mainly the documents that were discussed during the meetings of the Task Force and the Leading Group. I also attended the meetings of both groups that took place during the research period. During these meetings I observed what happened and made reports shortly afterwards to use for my analysis. Thirdly, I interviewed members of both groups. In total I had twelve interviews: six in each municipality. I recorded these interviews and made transcripts of them, which I used for my analysis. In the texts that I collected, from the documents, meetings and interviews, I looked for traces of discourses. First, from a structure perspective, I looked for traces of discourses-in-practice. Then, from an agency perspective, I looked for traces of discursive practice. Based on these analyses I wrote the stories about both municipalities. In these stories I applied the criteria of consistency, transparency, reflexivity and epoché. This can be seen, amongst others, in the extensive character of the stories. I used many quotes from the interviews I had and direct phrases from the reports of the meetings I attended. I also described the steps I took and the choices I made and reflected several times on my own role as a researcher.

The central question of this research, "How do municipalities with their partners make sense of the economic crisis?", can be answered theoretically and empirically.

The theoretical answer is that this sensemaking process has a discursive character, where a structure perspective and an agency perspective can be distinguished. Municipalities and their partners made sense of the economic crisis on the one hand by translating broader existing discourses to their local practice. On the other hand, municipalities and their partners also constructed their own discourse on the economic crisis through their interaction, their discursive practice. These two perspectives are not conflicting, but they coexist. Both deserve to be given a

fair amount of attention, to get a thorough description of the discursive process of sensemaking of the economic crisis.

A more empirical answer to the central question shows where the municipalities were similar and where they show interesting differences.

A striking analogy between the Task Force in Highwater and the Leading Group in Dryland is that both groups used a statistically based discourse about the economic crisis as framework and starting point for their process of making sense of the economic crisis.

Another analogy is that the broader discourse about public savings influenced the sensemaking process in both Highwater and Dryland. As a result of the discourse on public savings, the activities of the Task Force and the Leading Group were slowed down and the focus shifted from short term activities to help citizens and entrepreneurs to long term discussions about the economic situation of the municipality.

An interesting difference between the Task Force in Highwater and the Leading Group in Dryland was the level of broader discourses that influenced the local discursive practice. In general, it seems that the Task Force in Highwater was more influenced by local and regional discourses and the Leading Group in Dryland more by national and global discourses. In both cases this was sensemaking from a structural perspective, but the level of the broader and existing discourses differed.

The empirical findings from Highwater and Dryland also show that attention for the perspectives, interests and backgrounds of different partners is important for the sensemaking process. In the Leading Group in Dryland, more attention was paid to this aspect than in the Task Force in Dryland. This difference in awareness seems to influence the effect. In Dryland people were more optimistic about the cooperation than in Highwater.

This research contributes to different discourses.

To the practice discourse on a micro level, in the two municipalities of Highwater and Dryland, this research contributes through the different stories that are told. The different stories of Highwater and Dryland are relevant for the people in these municipalities, because they show some interesting analogies and differences. The different stories from the structure and agency perspective show how one can look at the local practice from different perspectives. Also during the research process my research contributed to the practice discourse in both municipalities, by the influence of my presence as a researcher in both groups. In a similar way, this book may contribute to the practice in both municipalities as a text that can be part in the local discourses.

On a macro level, this research contributes to the practice discourses by showing for example politicians or civil servants from other municipalities, or other people like consultants who work for municipalities, how one can look at the economic crisis as a discourse. This research also shows the role of discourse in day to day business, by stressing how reality is discursively constructed.

Through language words are given to new phenomena or phenomena that have to be redefined. It can also make people more aware of their own role in this discursive process.

The contribution of this research to the academic discourse in which I participate, is first of all linked to the way in which I deal with the role and influence of the researcher. In this research much attention is paid to the role and influence of the researcher, based on the criteria of transparency and reflexivity, and this may contribute to the academic discourse on this subject. Another aspect is the way in which the structure-agency issue is addressed in this research. The juxtaposition of two stories about the same municipality may contribute to the discourse on how to deal with the structure-agency issue.

Finally, from the viewpoint of reflexivity, this research contributes to my personal development as a researcher and human being. The structure perspective in this research contributes to the awareness of the contingency of my own research and the discursive character of the reality in which we live. On the other hand, the agency perspective in this research contributes to the awareness of my own role and influence in the discourses in which I participate.



## Samenvatting

In 2008 begon een wereldwijde economische crisis die veel landen, organisaties en individuen over de hele wereld trof. Gemeenten in Nederland werden ook getroffen door deze economische crisis. Zij moesten reageren op de gebeurtenissen die zich voordeden; gebeurtenissen die deel uitmaakten van een breder fenomeen dat 'de economische crisis' werd genoemd.

De centrale vraag van dit onderzoek is "Hoe geven gemeenten met hun partners betekenis aan de economische crisis?". In dit onderzoek beschouw ik de economische crisis als een geconstrueerde werkelijkheid. De economische crisis maakt geen deel uit van een objectieve waarheid 'buiten ons', maar is een deel van een realiteit die wordt geconstrueerd in de interactie tussen mensen. In deze interactie proberen mensen betekenis te geven aan gebeurtenissen en ervaringen. Deze gebeurtenissen en ervaringen hebben geen betekenis in zichzelf: mensen construeren betekenis, ze geven zin aan de gebeurtenissen en ervaringen door het vormen van een samenhangend geheel waarin de gebeurtenissen en ervaringen betekenis hebben.

In dit proces van 'sensemaking' speelt het begrip 'discours' een belangrijke rol. Een discours is een geheel van (gesproken en geschreven) uitingen dat een object construeert. Het begrip discours toont de belangrijke rol van taal in het proces van betekenisgeving. Mensen gebruiken taal om betekenis te geven aan de werkelijkheid. De manier waarop mensen praten over gebeurtenissen en ervaringen bepaalt de betekenis van deze gebeurtenissen. Ze worden met elkaar verbonden in één coherent discours. Men kan dus zeggen dat de werkelijkheid discursief geconstrueerd wordt.

Doordat het discours zo'n belangrijke rol speelt in het proces van sensemaking, wordt er ook macht uitgeoefend door het discours. Het discours is een machtsmechanisme in onze sociale werkelijkheid. Tussen mensen wordt macht uitgeoefend via het discours. Macht, in deze betekenis, is niet iets dat kan worden verkregen, bezeten of gedeeld door iemand. Het werkt ook niet alleen top-down en het is niet intentioneel. Macht 'gebeurt' via het discours.

Dit onderzoek gaat over discourses over de economische crisis, specifiek in twee Nederlandse gemeenten. De economische crisis is ook een geconstrueerde werkelijkheid, ze krijgt betekenis door discursieve processen. Omdat discourses over de economische crisis de sociale realiteit van mensen construeren, en omdat dit ook leidt tot concrete acties, kan men zeggen dat er macht wordt uitgeoefend door deze discourses over de economische crisis. De twee gemeenten in dit onderzoek geven betekenis aan de economische crisis, samen met een aantal van hun partners: belangrijke organisaties binnen de lokale of regionale gemeenschap, zoals ondernemers, zorg- en onderwijsinstellingen, lokale banken en woningcorporaties. In een Taskforce of Kopgroep bespreken ze de betekenis van de economische crisis voor hun gemeente en welke acties zij kunnen nemen om de gevolgen van de economische crisis te verzachten. Dit onderzoek is gericht op het discursieve proces dat plaatsvindt in deze groepen.

Aangezien de werkelijkheid sociaal geconstrueerd wordt door middel van discursieve processen, is de betekenis die geconstrueerd wordt contingent. Betekenis is ingebed in specifieke omstandigheden en gekoppeld aan specifieke discursieve processen. Hetzelfde geldt voor (wetenschappelijk) onderzoek naar deze discursieve processen. Kennis die wordt verkregen door middel van dit onderzoek is ook contingent, ingebed in de specifieke context van het onderzoek. De specifieke omstandigheden waarin het onderzoek heeft plaatsgevonden, de mensen die betrokken zijn bij het onderzoek, zowel onderzoeker als onderzoeksobjecten, zijn allemaal van invloed op de uitkomst van het onderzoek.

Het contingente karakter van dit onderzoek wordt in dit boek uitgebreid beschreven. De positivistische criteria van validiteit en betrouwbaarheid zijn niet van toepassing op dit onderzoek, maar het voldoet wel aan de criteria van de consistentie, transparantie en reflexiviteit. Consistentie houdt in dat het onderzoek is uitgevoerd op basis van een samenhangend geheel van uitgangspunten dat consequent wordt toegepast; het bevat geen interne tegenstrijdigheden. Transparantie betekent dat de onderzoeker transparant is over de stappen die hij heeft genomen en de keuzes die hij heeft gemaakt. Reflexiviteit betekent dat de onderzoeker geregeld reflecteert op zijn eigen rol en de invloed die hij op het onderzoek heeft gehad. De houding van een onderzoeker die wil voldoen aan de criteria van consistentie, transparantie en reflexiviteit, is een houding van fenomenologische epoché. Dit betekent dat de onderzoeker zijn oordeel uitstelt of 'tussen haakjes plaatst', om de werkelijkheid die wordt bestudeerd optimaal voor zichzelf te laten spreken.

Dit onderzoek gaat over discoursen over de economische crisis. De begrippen discours en discoursanalyse worden op verschillende manieren gebruikt. In dit onderzoek sluit ik mij aan bij Michel Foucault. Zijn positie wordt, onder andere, afgezet tegen die van Richard Rorty en Slavoj Žižek. Foucault hanteert een kritische benadering, waarbij de macht die uitgaat van het discours wordt benadrukt. In dit onderzoek heb ik gekeken naar de macht die uitging van de discoursen over de economische crisis in de twee gemeenten die ik heb onderzocht.

Er zijn twee perspectieven om naar te kijken naar discoursen. Aan de ene kant is er het bredere discours dat zich ontwikkelt op macroniveau en dat lokale discursieve processen structureert. Dit 'discourse-in-practice' vormt een raamwerk voor processen van betekenisgeving die plaatsvinden op lokaal niveau. In dit onderzoek wordt dit het structuurperspectief genoemd. Aan de andere kant is er het lokale discursieve proces waarbij individuen in interactie de werkelijkheid (re)construeren. Deze 'discursive practice' kan vanuit het lokale niveau de bredere en bestaande discoursen beïnvloeden. In dit onderzoek wordt dit het handelingsperspectief genoemd. De relatie tussen structuur- en handelingsperspectief staat centraal in het zogenaamde structuur-handelingsvraagstuk. Verschillende posities in dit structuur-handelingsvraagstuk worden in dit onderzoek besproken. Ik kies voor een positie waarbij beide perspectieven worden beschouwd als complementair in plaats van concurrerend. Ik zoek naar discoursen over de economische crisis



vanuit beide perspectieven: bredere en bestaande discoursen die de lokale processen bij de gemeenten die worden bestudeerd beïnvloeden en lokale discursieve praktijken waar betekenis wordt gegeven in interactie tussen individuele leden van de groepen die worden bestudeerd.

Het structuur-handelingsvraagstuk wordt in dit onderzoek behandeld met behulp van de methode van analytic bracketing. Analytic bracketing houdt in dat de onderzoeker constant verandert van perspectief, in dit geval van het structuur- naar het handelingsperspectief en vice versa. De perspectieven worden niet vermengd, maar apart behandeld. In dit onderzoek heb ik ervoor gekozen om de methode van analytic bracketing toe te passen door het beschrijven van twee verhalen voor elk van de gemeenten die worden bestudeerd: een verhaal vanuit een structuurperspectief en een verhaal vanuit een handelingsperspectief. Pas in het laatste deel van de analyse worden beide verhalen met elkaar verbonden. Dit naast elkaar plaatsen van het structuur- en handelingsperspectief toont het verschil tussen beide, maar ook de verschillende manieren waarop macht wordt uitgeoefend in beide perspectieven.

Voor dit onderzoek zijn twee Nederlandse gemeenten geselecteerd, hier met fictieve namen aangeduid als Highwater en Dryland. Dit waren beide gemeenten die een Taskforce (in Highwater) of Kopgroep (in Dryland) hadden gevormd om de gevolgen van de economische crisis te verzachten. Beide groepen bestonden uit vertegenwoordigers van de gemeente en van andere organisaties. In het kader van dit onderzoek zijn deze groepen een jaar lang gevolgd. De Taskforce in Highwater is gevolgd van april 2010 tot juli 2011 en de Kopgroep in Dryland is gevolgd van november 2010 tot november 2011. Voor dit onderzoek heb ik documenten bestudeerd die betrekking hadden op beide groepen. Dit waren vooral de documenten die tijdens de bijeenkomsten van de Taskforce en de Kopgroep werden besproken. Ik heb ook de bijeenkomsten van beide groepen bijgewoond die plaatsvonden tijdens de onderzoeksperiode. Tijdens deze bijeenkomsten heb ik geobserveerd wat er gebeurde en direct daarna verslagen gemaakt om te gebruiken bij mijn analyse. Ten derde heb ik leden van beide groepen geïnterviewd. In totaal heb ik twaalf interviews gehouden: zes in elke gemeente. Ik heb geluidsopnames gemaakt van deze interviews en er later transcripties van gemaakt, die ik ook voor mijn analyse heb gebruikt. In de teksten die ik verzameld heb vanuit de documenten, bijeenkomsten en interviews, heb ik gezocht naar sporen van discoursen. Eerst zocht ik vanuit een structuurperspectief naar sporen van 'discourse-in-practice'. Daarna zocht ik vanuit een handelingsperspectief naar sporen van 'discursive practice'. Op basis van deze analyses schreef ik de verhalen over beide gemeenten. In deze verhalen heb ik de criteria van consistentie, transparantie, reflexiviteit en epoché toegepast. Dit blijkt, onder andere, uit de uitgebreidheid van de verhalen. Ik heb veel citaten gebruikt uit de interviews die ik heb gehouden en directe passages uit de verslagen van de bijeenkomsten die ik heb bijgewoond. Ik heb ook de stappen die ik genomen heb en de keuzes die ik heb gemaakt beschreven en meerdere malen op mijn eigen rol als onderzoeker gereflecteerd.

De centrale vraag van dit onderzoek, "Hoe geven gemeenten met hun partners betekenis aan de economische crisis?", kan zowel vanuit de theorie als vanuit de empirie worden beantwoord.

De theoretische antwoord is dat het proces van betekenisgeving een discursief karakter heeft, waarbij een structuurperspectief en een handelingsperspectief kunnen worden onderscheiden. Gemeenten en hun partners gaven aan de ene kant betekenis aan de economische crisis door het vertalen van bredere bestaande discoursen naar hun lokale praktijk. Aan de andere kant construeerden gemeenten en hun partners in interactie ook hun eigen discours over de economische crisis, in hun discursive practice. Deze twee perspectieven zijn niet tegenstrijdig, maar ze bestaan naast elkaar. Beide verdienen een evenredige hoeveelheid aandacht, om zo tot een zorgvuldige beschrijving van het discursieve proces van betekenisgeving van de economische crisis te komen.

Het antwoord op de centrale vraag vanuit de empirie laat de overeenkomsten en verschillen tussen de beide gemeenten zien.

Een opvallende overeenkomst tussen de Taskforce in Highwater en de Kopgroep in Dryland is dat beide groepen een statistisch discours over de economische crisis gebruikten als kader en uitgangspunt voor hun proces van betekenisgeving aan de economische crisis.

Een andere overeenkomst is dat het bredere discours over bezuinigingen in zowel Highwater als Dryland invloed had op het proces van betekenisgeving. Als gevolg van het discours over bezuinigingen zijn de activiteiten van beide groepen verminderd en is de focus verschoven van korte termijn activiteiten om inwoners en ondernemers te helpen naar lange termijn discussies over de economische situatie van de gemeente.

Een interessant verschil tussen de Taskforce in Highwater en de Kopgroep in Dryland is het niveau van de bredere discoursen dat de lokale discursieve praktijk beïnvloedde. In het algemeen lijkt het erop dat de Taskforce in Highwater meer werd beïnvloed door lokale en regionale discoursen en de Kopgroep in Dryland meer door nationale en mondiale discoursen. In beide gevallen was dit betekenisgeving vanuit een structuurperspectief, maar het niveau van de bredere en bestaande discoursen verschilt.

De empirische bevindingen vanuit Highwater en Dryland tonen ook aan dat aandacht voor de verschillende perspectieven, interesses en achtergronden van de partners belangrijk is voor het proces van betekenisgeving. In de Kopgroep in Dryland werd meer aandacht besteed aan dit aspect dan in de Taskforce in Dryland. Dit verschil in aandacht lijkt het effect te beïnvloeden. In Dryland waren mensen optimistischer over de samenwerking dan in Highwater.

Dit onderzoek draagt bij aan verschillende discoursen.

In eerste instantie draagt het bij aan het praktijkdiscours op microniveau, in de twee gemeenten Highwater en Dryland. Dit onderzoek levert een bijdrage door de verschillende verhalen die worden verteld. De verschillende verhalen van Highwater en Dryland zijn relevant voor de mensen in deze gemeenten, omdat ze een aantal interessante overeenkomsten en verschillen laten

zien. De verschillende verhalen vanuit een structuur- en handelingsperspectief laten zien hoe men vanuit verschillende perspectieven naar de lokale praktijk kan kijken. Ook tijdens het onderzoeksproces heeft mijn onderzoek bijgedragen aan het praktijkdiscours in de gemeenten, door de invloed van mijn aanwezigheid als onderzoeker in beide groepen. Op een vergelijkbare manier kan dit boek een bijdrage leveren aan de praktijk in beide gemeenten als een tekst die deel kan gaan uitmaken van het lokale discours.

Op macroniveau draagt dit onderzoek bij aan het praktijkdiscours doordat het laat zien aan bijvoorbeeld politici of ambtenaren uit andere gemeenten of andere mensen zoals consultants die voor gemeenten werken, hoe men de economische crisis als discours kan zien. Dit onderzoek toont ook de rol van het discours in de dagelijkse praktijk aan, door te benadrukken hoe de werkelijkheid discursief wordt geconstrueerd. Door middel van taal wordt betekenis gegeven aan nieuwe verschijnselen of verschijnselen die moeten worden geherdefinieerd. Het kan mensen ook bewuster maken van hun eigen rol in dit discursieve proces.

De bijdrage van dit onderzoek aan de academische discours waarin ik deelneem, heeft in de eerste plaats te maken met de manier waarop ik omga met de rol en invloed van de onderzoeker. In dit onderzoek wordt veel aandacht besteed aan de rol en de invloed van de onderzoeker, aansluitend bij de criteria van transparantie en reflexiviteit, en dit kan bijdragen aan het academische discours over dit onderwerp. Een ander aspect is de manier waarop het structuur-handelingsvraagstuk wordt behandeld in dit onderzoek. De combinatie van de twee verhalen over dezelfde gemeente kan een bijdrage leveren aan het discours over hoe om te gaan met de structuur-handelingsvraagstuk.

Tot slot, vanuit het oogpunt van reflexiviteit, draagt dit onderzoek bij aan mijn persoonlijke ontwikkeling als onderzoeker en mens. Het structuurperspectief in dit onderzoek draagt bij aan de bewustwording van de contingentie van mijn eigen onderzoek en het discursieve karakter van de werkelijkheid waarin ik leef. Aan de andere kant draagt het handelingsperspectief in dit onderzoek bij aan de bewustwording van mijn eigen rol en invloed in de discoursen waarin ik deelnemen.



## **Dankwoord**

Volgt